

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

25¢

OCT.



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE STORY

• THE RAWHIDE RANNYHAN!

by WILLIAM VANCE



• RED HELL HITS CANYON DIABLO!

by E. J. LEONARD, JR.

• HOT LEAD HARVEST

by MARVIN DEVRIES

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TROUBLE WITH BRANDS

*The wild days of the Old
West may be gone for some,
but here's one gent who still
lives by his cayuse, his wits—
and his smoke pole!*

By **BART CASSIDY**

WITH the modernization of ranching, it might be thought that the brand inspector's, or range detective's, job has gone soft. There is an idea floating around to the effect that the old-time brand inspector spent all his time throwing hot lead at rustlers, and that as the old horse-drawn rustler disappeared, so did the brand inspector's job.

That is all wrong. The brand inspector does drive a car now, but he usually has a horse trailer hitched onto the back of it, and his horse and sixgun go right along with him, though he usually puts 50,000 miles a year on his speedometer. He still prowls the range at night. In Texas he carries a commission from the Texas Rangers, though he only uses his power of arrest in connection with cattle cases on which he works in close contact with local authorities.

Now his duties are varied, and he will have a territory of ten or twenty counties to cover and keep quiet. He frequently has to follow a case into the adjoining state before he can break it, but he is still one of those old law officers who usually gets his man once he starts after him.

The best brand inspectors seem to have all had similar backgrounds before they got their jobs. Usually they were working cowhands who first gravitated toward enforcement work by way of deputy sheriff's jobs

or police jobs, and then went into service as brand inspectors. Thus they are experienced cow-country detectives, knowing both cattle and the men who steal them, and how to handle them.

As an example of his typical day's work, some rancher might find half a dozen stray cattle on his place, and not recognizing their brands as belonging to neighbors, he will call the Association's brand inspector. The brand inspector carries brand books for the whole state. In Texas, all brands in each county must be registered at the county courthouse.

The inspector, whose job makes him a human encyclopedia of brands, might recognize or identify the brand as one belonging to a ranch several hundred miles away. That raises the question of how the cattle got there and it is his business, not just to notify the owner, but to find out "how-come?"

Those strays would offer several possibilities. Thieves might have stolen them from the original owner and might have been driving them through the country when they suddenly decided that they were too hot to hold onto, and turned them loose. Or they might have escaped from a larger herd of stolen stock, and the thieves didn't want to come back and claim them. Again, the stock might have been stolen from the

(Continued on page 8)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



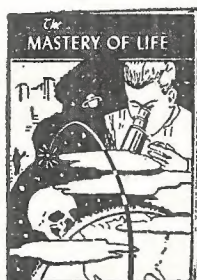
Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

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(Continued from page 6)

original owner and sold to an honest neighbor of the rancher, and have escaped from his place before he had a chance to brand them. Or they could have been bought legitimately.

At any rate, there are many possibilities in a setup like this, and it is the brand inspector's job to untangle the business and see whether a crime had been committed, and to see that the cattle get back to their rightful owner. This might uncover a whole rustling scheme before it is finally untangled.

THOUGH the field inspector's main job is to locate stolen cattle and to bring the rustlers into the hoosegow, he has plenty of other work to keep him busy in the meantime. If a man is rounding up on open range, and is getting ready to ship stock, he will call for the brand inspector, who will stand by to spot strays belonging to other brands, and who can give the shipper a clean bill of health, meaning that his stuff has been checked, and assuring the buyer that the shipper isn't running any of his neighbor's stuff through on the deal. This is good protection for the honest cattle shipper.

He checks cattle sales, and armed with a list of all stolen cattle in the state, he keeps an eye on the brands that are changing hands. This little chore puts him on the track of a good many thieves. He also checks brands at railroad terminals and slaughter houses, turning up more stolen cattle, returning it to its owner and tracing the thieves and leading them to the hoosegow.

His big job centers around his two main tasks, to recover stolen cattle and to throw the rustlers into the can. He works for a private agency, the big cattlemen's association, and his main task is to protect the stock belonging to its members. But he will work just as hard to recover stock for a non-member, because the association be-

lieves that as long as there is a cattle thief running around loose, he is a menace to the members. Therefore they are happy to round him up before he gets his hands on any of the members' stock.

While much of the present-day cattle detective's moving about is done in a car, it is basically the same job as when he took a riding horse and a pack mule and went out to lie in wait on some lonesome range to catch the rustlers in the act. Today his packhorse is likely to be a Buick car with a horse trailer hitched onto the rear bumper, and his camping gear and bedroll in the back seat of the sedan.

He will answer a call from a rancher who has a big place and has been losing cattle, and he will drive out onto the back range in his car and make camp by a waterhole or windmill. Then he will loaf and rest all day, or sit on a high place and watch the vast landscape with a pair of strong field glasses.

Then when night comes, he will have cooked his supper over a campfire, and will have saddled his horse and gone on the prowl. He will ride around the range, lie in wait in sight of grazing or sleeping cattle, hide in dark thickets near them and wait through long hours—in short he will have reverted to the practices of the old-time range detective.

And he catches many of his rustlers by this time-honored old method. It pays off, or he wouldn't still be using it.

He has learned that smart rustlers now steer clear of cattle wearing well-known brands of big ranches. They are dynamite; the rustler can't sell them. The rustler wants to steal cattle with some small unknown brand on it, a brand nobody will recognize before he has time to sell the cow and get away safely.

Therefore the cattle detective likes to work with the little fellow as much as with the big rancher. The little man is less able to take the losses, and he is the biggest victim of today's rustlers. ● ● ●

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BOOTHILL BLUNDER

*Al was a no-account claim-jumper to the day he died.
In fact, to the day after he died. . . .*

By JOHN T. LYNCH

AL CATT had been punched, stabbed, and shot at so many times for jumping claims in and around Virginia City, Nevada, in 1860, that the rest of the population started to think that he had nine lives, as his last name implied. But one afternoon, in jumping one claim too many, he went down under a barrage of bullets. People said he had jumped his last claim.

The town undertaker had just finished pulling the gold fillings out of Al Catt's teeth when he was called down to the True Heart Saloon & Gambling Emporium to collect what was left of Bluechip Barnes. Bluechip had been guilty of a breach of etiquette; he had been wearing a sleeve device to hold out certain pasteboards. It worked fine, for awhile.

When a man died, in Virginia City, his sins died with him. So it was with both the claim-jumper and the crooked gambler.

The undertaker, a democratic man, gave the same expert care to all comers, for a set fee. This sum, always furnished by friends—and enemies—of the deceased, did not include the digging of the grave. It was up to the mourners to hire their own grave digger.

Although a claim-jumper, Al Catt came roughly under the heading of a working man in the town's social system. Therefore, the miners, prospectors, and other workers hired one Will Moore, a local barfly and part-time gravedigger, to dig Catt's final resting place.

The professional gambling-and-saloon society chipped in and hired Honest Johnny Ellis to open a hole in boothill to receive Bluechip.

Both funerals were to be held on the following morning. The working folks fixed the time of Al Catt's service for an early hour. The gambler's mourners, not given to early rising for any purpose, set the gambler's funeral for noon. Two different elements of the population. Two different funerals.

The two gravediggers were as different in personality as were the general habits of their employers, and they carried out their jobs accordingly.

Will Moore, the barfly, hired to dig the claim-jumper's grave, got paid in advance. This was a mistake. Will stopped in a saloon to obtain liquid strength. The ground in Boothill was very hard. Will spent the night in the saloon. He forgot all about the grave digging deal. . . .

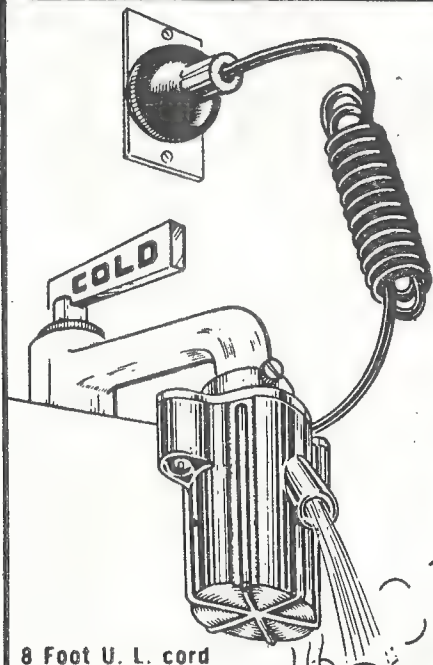
Not so with Honest Johnny Ellis. Just after sundown, in the cool of the evening, and under the bright moonlight, he went out to Boothill and labored faithfully until the gambler's grave was ready. He then went home and went to bed.

Early in the morning the working members of the place gathered at the undertaker's. From there the procession, bearing the remains of Al Catt, wended its way to the cemetery. The pallbearers in the lead had no trouble in locating the freshly dug grave. Mister Catt was duly planted, and the grave closed. The mourners departed.

At noon, when the assorted bartenders, painted ladies and gamblers arrived sadly at the Boothill with the pine-boxed body of Bluechip, they found no place to sink it. . . . Al Catt, a claim-jumper in life, became a grave-jumper in death. ● ● ●

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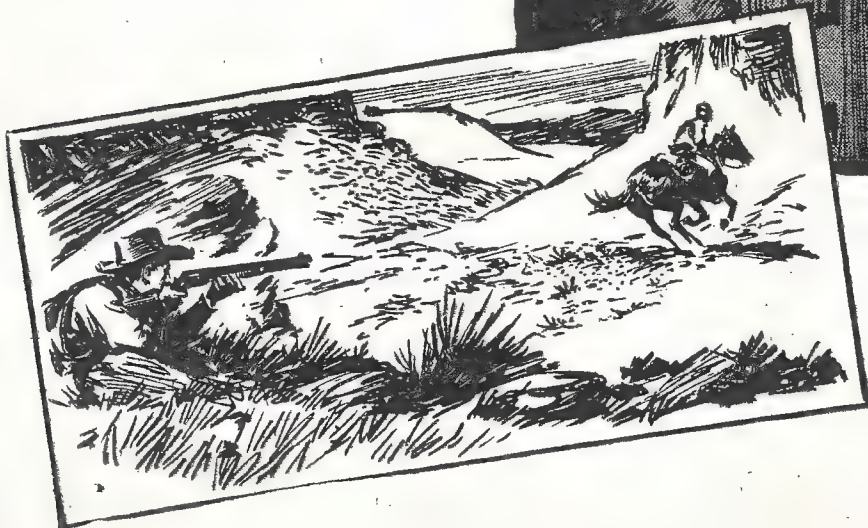
10 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE!

THE RAWHIDE RANNYHAN!

*A Saga of
the Old West*

By
**WILLIAM
VANCE**

For days, Dan Clayton had played a cat-and-mouse game in the hills, knowing he could kill his quarry whenever he chose. And then Dan discovered that he himself was—the hunted!





"You go," she cried, "and I won't be here when you come back!"

DAN CLAYTON swung off the dust-covered, wind-broken paint in front of the courthouse. Emil Madden came out of his saloon across the street and stepped through the dust of the street and said, "I'll take your pony, Dan."

The rangy big man with the hard gray eyes said, "Thanks, Emil. Where's he?"

Emil Madden, short and quick with an old and seamy face nodded toward the courthouse. "In there, Dan." He squinted at the hot yellow sun and then looked briefly at Dan before he said, "Wonder what *she's* gonna do now?"

"The dead are a long time gone," Clayton said, wondering how it came so easily.

He strode toward the steps and then stopped suddenly. A couple of kids were peering in a window of the courthouse, craning their necks. They looked up and saw Clayton watching them and they scuttled out of sight around the rear of the building. He went on up the courthouse steps two at a time.

Behind Clayton, Madden looked at the winded, head-down paint and shook his head. "Cold-blooded devil," he muttered. "His own brother, too." He led the horse through the alley by his saloon toward the corral in the rear.

Dan Clayton went through the dusty corridor and stopped in front of an open door. A group of men stood inside, low-voiced and solemn. When Dan's footsteps halted at the doorway they looked up and their talk stopped.

Cam Johnson dropped a cigarette on the littered floor and ground it out with the toe of his boot before he came to meet Clayton. The two men shook hands briefly and Cam said, "I'm sorry as hell, Dan. Just one of them things a lawman goes up against now and then."

"He knew what it was when he took the job," Clayton said coolly. "Where's he now?"

Cam jerked his head over his shoulder and turned. "Come on, Dan." He opened a door and stood aside, waiting for Clayton.

Clayton stepped through the door and he heard the swift rush of low voices as Cam closed the door. Dan caught a word here and there. They were talking about Evalina. Remembering Madden's casual question he knew it was something the whole town of One Step was pushing around in its collective mind. He stood there, a slow lump forming in his throat and he reached up a hand and took off his hat.

He stared at the bright Navajo blanket someone had spread over Dunc. Clayton recognized Dunc's body through the blan-

ket. The spread of the shoulders, the leanness of hip and thigh showing through the bright reds and yellows and greens. The door opened behind him and Cam slipped out and Dan Clayton was alone with his dead brother.

The lump in his throat had grown to suffocating size as he stepped forward and lifted the blanket. It might have been Dan Clayton on the rough pine table for the two of them looked alike, dark, lean-featured, high cheek bones, dark brushy brows, thin noses, slightly hooked. Facial expression and lip lines ended the resemblance. The man on the table had a dissipated look that shone through death.

Clayton pulled the blanket further down and for a moment his fingers were busy with the bright shield pinned to a calico shirt. He raised the blanket then and pulled it back into place. He turned swiftly, putting his hat on his head as he went to the door, his lean brown face without a visible sign of emotion.

The talk died again as Clayton came into the room. Cam Johnson detached himself from the group and came toward Clayton.

"You got a posse out, Cam?" Clayton asked.

Cam Johnson cleared his throat and then nodded instead of speaking.

"Why ain't you with them?" Clayton asked abruptly.

Johnson reddened as though Clayton had challenged him. "Got a court session tomorrow, Dan," he said testily. "Didn't know when the posse'd get back. Got a good man in charge. Charlie Silvers."

The men in the sheriff's office were listening eagerly to this exchange. Cam Johnson saw they all had their ears raised and he suddenly remembered he had an election coming up. "I'm still sheriff, Dan. I'll decide who to send out."

Dan showed him the shield he'd taken from Dunc's shirt. "Mind if I keep this, sheriff?"

Cam stroked his sandy mustache and said, "Wel-l-l-l, it's county property. I don't see—"

"I want Dunc's job," Clayton said harshly. "Least till Hobe Batson's brought in."

"He'll be brought in," muttered Cam Johnson.

"Without my help, is that it?"

Cam Johnson looked at the other men in the office. He wanted desperately to avoid talking to Clayton before a crowd. Dan was a hard man to deal with, the sheriff pondered. Cam cleared his throat. "Don't misunderstand me, Dan," he said. He was apologizing and he realized it and it made him mad. "I'd admire to have your help. But what I'm tryin' to tell you is we're movin' the earth to locate Hobe and bring 'im back. I don't know's you'd help any."

"You swearin' me in or not?" Clayton asked, his thin nostrils twitching.

Cam Johnson studied the floor for a moment. Then he said tonelessly, "Raise your right hand. . . ."

WHEN Clayton left the courthouse he knew he'd made another enemy. Cam Johnson'd been sitting on the fence until now. He snorted contemptuously, thinking about it. "Damned sucker. Don't know from straight up," he muttered.

Phil Gallagher hailed him from the bank and when Clayton stopped and turned Gallagher hurried to him. "See here, Dan," the tall spare, graying man said, "I hate to ask at a time like this, but dammit, you're supposed to check them books. You just got to do it this week. Examiner's coming."

"You check 'em," Clayton said. "You've always done it."

Gallagher shook his head despairingly. "Well, I'll do it this time. But next time—" He broke off as Clayton was striding across the street.

He stepped into Madden's. The usual crowd of loafers were around the bar and card table. The crap table and roulette

wheel were covered. Clayton stared contemptuously at the hangers-on and went to the bar.

Emil had a bottle and glass waiting. Clayton poured a meagre drink and tossed it off neat. He said, "Like to borrow a pair and your rig, Emil. I'll send 'em back with one of the boys."

Madden nodded. "Right away, Dan?"

Clayton closed his lips firmly, watching the near men edge in closer so they could hear better. He said, louder than necessary, "Soon's I can pick up Evalina and her things. I'm takin' her to the ranch."

He wheeled and went toward the door, hearing the low hum of voices build up. When the batwing doors swung shut behind him, he knew the gossipers were busy.

He walked slowly down the street, his head down, deep in thought. This was the part he didn't like. He didn't understand Evalina and he didn't trust people he couldn't understand. He shook his head as he turned in at a neat frame house, one of the few houses in One Step that boasted a coat of paint.

A big, well-fed, black-mustached man came out of Evalina's door. Clayton stopped watching, as the man, a stranger in One Step, bowed from his waist with his hat over his heart in a way that made Clayton growl under his breath. The big man turned and came down the steps and passed Clayton with scarcely a glance. There was an odor of shaving soap and talcum powder about the man and Clayton was aware that he was sweaty and dirty. He went on up on the porch and Evalina looked as though she'd been waiting for him.

She was not a tall girl but she gave the illusion of height, because of her slender, shapely figure. She said, "Hello, Dan," in her low and oddly vibrant voice.

He remembered the first time he'd heard her voice. She and Dunc had stepped off the train a moment before, a lifetime ago, and she'd stood there looking at him with

a friendly smile and she'd said, "So this is Dan!" She put out her hand to him then.

Standing before her now, looking down at the exquisiteness of her features, the soft coil of wheat-colored hair, the swell of her bosom and the flare of her hips, he ached for a first meeting with her. A first meeting that would be different could mean everything.

There was no friendliness in her eyes or her voice when she said, "I've been expecting you." She stood aside, waiting.

He took off his hat and went into the parlor. It was a pleasant room with a lived-in look. A basket of sewing sat on the floor beside the biggest chair. An organ stood by the window with music on the rack. There were pictures on the walls and everywhere was evidence of a woman who took pride in her home, he thought.

"Who was that?" He stood there, tall and dark and forbidding, thinking about this house and the woman who lived in it, thinking of the woman with a loose yearning that'd been with him since he couldn't remember.

"Just business," she said diffidently.

"He's got bad eyes," Clayton said. He didn't remember the man's eyes at all.

"It's just business," she repeated.

"Get your things ready," Clayton said.

She was silent for so long he thought she hadn't heard. He started to speak when she raised her head to him. "I'll have something to say about that, Dan." She sat placidly in the chair and picked up her basket of sewing.

Clayton felt his anger surge up, knowing this would be the way of it. He asked her fiercely, "You gonna stay here and starve, is that it?" He took a few quick steps up and down the room, her resistance to his will stirring him. "Or maybe you'll work for Emil?"

She raised her eyes briefly and there was a tiny smile on her face. "You can't have your way all the time, Dan," she said.

He curbed his desire to curse. "I'm tryin' to help," he said.

She nodded. "I know. How do you think I keep this place, Dan? Dunc hasn't brought any money home since—since, well a long time ago. Now that he's gone I'll do as well as before."

"Maybe you'll move out to Stinking Springs," he said. "That's all Dunc left you, isn't it?" His voice was brutal.

"I could do worse," she said serenely, her calm infuriating.

"Not a blade of grass growin' on it," he cried. "Ain't good for nothin' Evalina. Don't see why Dunc threw away good money on it."

"Maybe you'll see some day," she said.

He was stubborn. "I'm not goin' to have people talkin'. I can do for you. I couldn't when Dunc—"

She stood up. "No, Dan. You've nothin' I want."

He glowered. "You've nothin'," he snarled. "Git some sense, woman. I can do—"

She said softly, interrupting him. "If you'd kept him there, he'd been all right."

"I tried," Clayton said. "I tried everything I knew to make him a man."

"You didn't try hard enough," she said. She sat down again and picked up her sewing basket. She dropped her hands then and leaned back in her chair and regarded him. "You're too hard, Dan. You was too hard on him just like you're too hard on everyone, including yourself. It's going to hurt you some day."

"I came here to help you," he said angrily, the red staining the brown of his face and neck.

"I'd like to help you," she said.

HE SLAMMED his hat on his head with an angry gesture. "You change your mind, send word by one of the boys," he said. He strode across the room and jerked open the door. Over his shoulder he added gruffly, "I'm stayin' in town

till the funeral. Maybe a while longer."

He looked at her, wondering what it was that went on behind her big eyes, under that gleaming coil of yellow hair. He closed the door, trying to close her out of his mind. He thought about her and Dunc but it wouldn't come out that way. She'd been Dunc's wife, but somehow or other it'd never seemed right to Clayton. Mostly, because they were so different. And now she was trying to blame him for Dunc being like he was. He wondered if maybe she was right. Maybe that's why he felt so bad about Dunc. But they'd been through a lot together, before Dunc got out of hand.

They'd got out here fifteen years ago with no more than a shirt between them, Dunc just a snot-nosed kid. "Phil Gallagher'd taken a shine to the pair of them and helped them. But it'd been hard work, getting a little something together. It'd been harder than if he hadn't had Dunc to bother with.

He remembered when Dunc had left and went off on his own. Damn fool kid, he needed a hand to steady him, Dan thought. *Like I tried to do*, he told himself, and there was some bitterness in him at the remembrance. Dunc wasn't having any curb bit put on him.

Dan remembered the scrapes he'd got Dunc out of; a shooting or two. A little rustling just for the hell-raising of it. There was gambling too, but that went by without too much trouble. Dunc was too weak to be a gambler. Dunc had really gone off the big dip when he fancied himself a real cowman and began trying to run the Circle C. That's when the blow-up had come and after it was over Dunc drifted off riding herd on railroad cattle and he'd come back with a bride, Evalina.

Remembering Evalina that first day he'd laid eyes on her, Dan felt the old familiar stab in his heart. He'd grown used to it, almost, by this time. He knew though, that certain thoughts he'd had, recurring over a period of years, would always be

with him. Thinking back, he couldn't remember when he'd began loving Evalina, but he thought it was that first day she stepped down from the train on a proud and grinning Dunc's arm. There'd been five years of hell, knowing her, and loving her and not being able to do anything about it.

Emil was waiting with his team at the corral. He said, "Watch that gray, Dan, she's half-broke and wilder'n hades."

"I guess I won't need 'em after all," Dan said. He was aware that Emil's back window was full of watching, curious eyes.

"She wouldn't go, huh?" Emil asked. He moved his shoulders.

Clayton's hard gray eyes narrowed. "You own that house she's livin' in, don't you?"

Emil's face took on a troubled look as he nodded. He said, hurriedly, "I guess I better unhitch these here horses."

"Wait a minute, Emil," Dan said curtly. "You tell her you gotta have that house. An' another thing—your wife, she don't have Evalina do any sewin', does she?"

Emil wet his lips with his tongue. "I reckon she does, Dan," he blurted. "But God a' mighty, man, you ain't astin' me to—"

"You tell your wife," Clayton said coldly, "to get her sewin' somewhere else. An' tell her to pass the word on."

Emil shook his head. "You ain't doin' right, Dan," he said.

"You don't know," Dan said. "It's for her own good."

"You ain't for sure, though," Emil argued. He was silent for a moment. "Them women'll be glad to cut her off. She's the purtiest thing ever set foot in this country. Only reason the women been gettin' her to sew is their men devil them into it."

"You get the word around," Dan said. "You need another extension on your note, Emil, I'll see Phil Gallagher gives it to you."

He went out through the alley beside Madden's saloon. Down by the courthouse he saw the posse swing in to the hitching rack. Three horses were loaded with their riders lying across their saddles. Dan went toward them, hurrying.

CHARLIE SILVERS barely nodded to Clayton as he dismounted. The deputy said, "Go find Cam, Button."

A youth with whitish fuzz on his face slipped out of his saddle and clumped up the courthouse steps. A crowd began to gather.

Clayton asked, "Where's Hobe, Charlie?"

Charlie Silvers glanced briefly at Clayton as he loosened his cinches. The other posse members stood around, tired, morose and sullen. Silvers jerked his head toward the mountains. "Up there," he said.

"You planted him?" Clayton said.

"Nope. He's still goin', last I saw."

"Maybe he's been hit, bad," Clayton suggested.

"Nope. He got Ben and Eph Eastwood first crack. Later on he downed Burt Spivens. Hobe can sure shoot that Winchester." Charlie Silvers spat in the dust and wiped his lips on his sleeve.

"Sure gonna be tough on ol' Missus Eastwood," one of the possemen offered.

The rest of them profanely agreed that old Mrs. Eastwood was sure to miss her two boys.

"You lost his trail then." Clayton pushed roughly ahead.

Silvers spat again. "Hell no. We just got tired him pickin' us off. He was holed up there in Rock Corral, mile o' rock at his back and good easy shootin' in front. He's got plenty water and food and shells."

"I see," Clayton said dryly. "You leave anybody up there to keep him from gettin' away?"

Charlie Silvers' face reddened. He said, "You think you could 'a done any better, Mister Clayton?"

"You're talkin', Silvers," Clayton said evenly.

Cam Johnson broke the tension that'd been building. He hurried down the steps, a worried look on his face and he kept looking anxiously at Clayton.

Dan Clayton shook his head. "Did you tell me," he asked coldly, "that Charlie Silvers is one hell of a good man, Cam?"

Cam Johnson turned a beet red and stared open-mouthed at Clayton.

"Well, go on," Clayton said. "Listen to his story." He turned on his heel and tramped down the street.

CHAPTER

2

Killer's Trail

Preacher Sam Coburn was a tall, white-haired man with a far-seeing look in his deepset burning black eyes and a wrinkled, kindly face. Most of One Step turned out for the first funeral of the day.

Preacher Coburn cleared his throat, standing beside the open grave with the coffin resting on two by fours over the hole.

"In my Father's house are many mansions. . . ." he began and before he was finished he made Duncan Clayton out to be a mighty fine man in spite of a few human frailties.

After the services, Dan stood with Evalina. She wore a thoughtful look and she hadn't been grieving and Dan knew the other town women were talking about her. If Evalina knew, she gave no indication of it.

"You change your mind?" he asked abruptly.

She shook her golden head. "I told you yesterday," she said in a voice so low he could hardly hear.

He nodded curtly. "You do, send me word." He turned away.

His horse was tied outside the cemetery gate. He took his guns off the horn and buckled them around his waist. His pack was on the cante, made since the night be-

fore. He swung up into his saddle and he saw her making her way toward the black-mustached stranger he'd seen the day before. He was troubled as he turned his horse away from the crowd, toward Rock Corral.

A quarter mile from the cluster of grayish-white rock, Clayton dismounted and got his carbine out of the saddle boot. He circled, climbing, keeping to cover. It took him two hours to get high enough to see into the fortress and the sun was still high enough to show him a pile of ashes that was a dead campfire and nothing else.

Hobe Batson hadn't waited for reinforcements to come back from One Step. Clayton hadn't expected to find the man there, but he had to start somewhere.

He thought about this as he scrambled over the rocks and came down into the enclosure. He squatted beside the dead campfire and rolled a cigarette with quick brown fingers.

He rubbed his fingers through the ashes and found them stone cold. He sat there with the dead cigarette dangling from between his lips. His eyes went over the immediate area, from the pile of coffee grounds beside the gray ashes to the shine of brass shells beside the cleft that commanded the approach to Rock Corral.

There were little bits of bacon rind between his feet and Hobe Batson must have squatted there and eaten, almost where Clayton now set on his heels, his hard gray eyes searching, never missing a thing.

At last Clayton rose and went down the incline, his body bent, studying the faint hoof marks in the hard rock. A scratch here and there, where an iron shoe had slid, a hoofprint in a depression that held a small accumulation of dirt, a dried stick freshly broken. He stopped and raised his head, staring above toward Monument Pass. That's where Hobe Batson had headed, Clayton thought. He felt satisfied in his own mind that Batson had gone through the pass.

Clayton was unhurried as he made his way back to his horse and mounted. He turned the animal toward the pass that split the darkening sky. Above him an early star winked and the mountain air began to stir, bringing a chill of snow and ice from the higher altitudes. As he rode he remembered what little he knew of Hobe Batson.

Hobe Batson had arrived in One Step between two days. That much Clayton knew from Emil Madden, who kept tab on arriving strangers. Curly Yates at the Lazy Y gave Batson a job, but the slow-talking Texan with his front teeth tipped with gold didn't like work and Curly was a slave driver. Batson quit after a week and hung around One Step, playing poker and making occasional excursions out of town that coincided with cattle raids. Other happenings too, like the miner who was killed and robbed. And a lone bandit tried to hold up the train and was panicked off when a couple of railroad guards made a fight of it.

People around One Step suspected Hobe Batson but there was no proof. Strangely enough, it wasn't any of these things that put Hobe Batson to flight. The way Emil had told it, Hobe was in a card game and called a gambler everyone knew to be honest. The gambler went for his iron and Hobe killed him in a fast gunplay.

Duncan Clayton had liked Wils Blake, the gambler, and while everyone agreed that Wils had gone for his gun first, they also agreed that Hobe had had enough time to slap Wils over the head with his own gun and not take a life. Dunc had taken it up on that basis and Hobe had shot and killed Duncan Clayton in much the same manner as he had disposed of Wils Blake.

And now he'd added three more men. Dan Clayton wondered how many men Hobe Batson had needlessly killed in his lifetime.

Clayton got through Monument Pass at dusky dark. He showed himself against

the sky and sat his horse there for a long moment, looking far down into the canyon at the glowering redness of a small campfire. When he was satisfied that he'd been seen he put his horse into a side canyon and made a dry and fireless camp.

Dan Clayton saw Hobe Batson the next morning, early. He saw him several times during the day as the well-mounted Texan circled the badlands, back toward the Rio Lito Mountains, north of One Step. Dan stayed just out of rifle range, sometimes out of sight, sometimes in plain view of the hurrying rider. He took a grim satisfaction in the growing concern with which Batson looked over his shoulder. At sundown on the third day, Clayton abandoned the trail and slogged into One Step.

Clayton stopped at the courthouse first. Cam Johnson greeted him coldly.

"Hobe's headed for the Rio Lito's," Clayton told the sheriff. "He'll more 'n likely hole up in that old mine cabin at the head of Devil Canyon."

Cam Johnson shook his head. "Ain't got a soul I can send up right now, Dan," he said.

Clayton said, unsmilingly, "I'm goin' up there in a day or so and smoke him out."

Cam Johnson got to his feet, his sandy mustache wagging. "You got the law on your side, Dan. That makes a powerful lot o' difference. Don't abuse that there star I give you."

Clayton laughed without humor. "Abuse it? Damn it, Cam, I'm givin' your office the first power it's had since you been sheriff."

Cam Johnson looked at the floor and sat down. He said in a low voice, "The things a man has to do to git votes. Shouldn't ought to be a votin' job a-tall."

OUTSIDE, Dan angled across the dust-covered street and into Madden's. Emil saw him coming in and hastily set the bottle and glass on the bar. The air in the room changed perceptibly as Dan came

up to the bar. The men's voices dropped and then stopped entirely.

"You get him?" Emil asked eagerly.

Clayton set his glass on the counter. "The time comes," he said steadily, "I'll get him."

Emil leaned across the bar. "Talk is now no jury'd convict him, Dan." He put both hands on the bar. "Mind you, I'm just repeatin' what I hear. The talk is Wils drew first and got what's comin' to him. Then when Dunc took it up, he got the same. 'Course, I don't know about the Eastwood boys and Burt."

Dan nodded. "The sheriff, he'd start that story," he said, "if he's afraid to go after Hobe. Maybe he's afraid."

Emil shook his head. "Not Cam. He ain't got sense enough to be scared o' anything or anybody."

Dan straightened. "That pony I left with you all right now?"

"Reckon so, Dan. Thought maybe his wind was broke but maybe not. You'll have to try 'im and find out."

Clayton said, "All right, Emil. Good night." He ignored the men in the saloon and tramped out into the night.

He went in the hotel and rang the bell. When Cotton Hooks came down stairs, Clayton said, "You got a big stranger here? Man with a black mustache. I saw him in town day Dunc was buried."

Hooks nodded. "Feller from Chicago, Mr. Clayton. Name o' McDermitt."

"What's his business?" Clayton asked.

"Dunno, sure don't. Close-mouthed cuss. Mighty unfriendly." He looked curiously at Clayton. "Thought maybe you might 'a knowed. Bein' as his business has been with Miz Clayton."

Clayton said, "Thanks, Cotton."

The light was shining through Evalina's window when Clayton went up the short walk from the street and crossed the porch and rapped on the door.

"Wait, I'm coming," Evalina's voice said from within.

He waited there in the darkness and wondered why it was he got so excited about seeing her. In a moment or two the door opened and she was framed in the yellow light from the lamp on the center table.

She said, "Oh," and the look on her face changed. She wore an apron and there was a smudge of flour on her face and the pleasant smell of baking bread came out on the room's warm air.

"Expectin' somebody else?" Clayton asked.

She stood back and waited for him to enter, not inviting him in nor denying him admission. "No," she said.

Clayton had a feeling she was lying. He lowered his head as he went through the door and lifted his hat. He sniffed appreciatively. "Cookin' something?" He decided not to press the issue. "Sure does smell good."

"I'm baking bread, Dan," she said, slowly closing the door and leaning against it, looking at him. "You're beginning to look like a man-hunter."

"People in One Step," he said in disgust. "Main job is gossipin'."

"It's no gossip," she said quietly. "Clarence Dew was hunting strays up beyond Monument Pass. He followed you and Hobe for two days. He's told it around you're a cross between a wolf and a cougar, Dan. Why do you do it?"

He shrugged. "You ought to know better than to ask a question like that."

"But I do," she cried softly. "Dunc didn't mean that much to you. Why, Dan, why are you doing this?"

"I didn't come to argue about that part of it," he said. "There's other things on my mind."

"Hunting him or hunting me," she said and there was something like fear in her face. "You look tired, Dan. I'll bet you're hungry too. Come on."

He followed her into the kitchen. The golden loaves of bread were on the oven

door. He felt a hunger pain in his belly where the half shot of rye lay, warming him and spreading through his body.

She got a pan of water from the reservoir on the stove. She put the pan on a washstand and lighted the bracket lamp above. She said, "You can use Dunc's razor and strop. If you want to look human."

He grinned at her without humor and stripped off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He washed first and then lathered and began shaving. The razor was dull and he had to strop it after every stroke. Just like Dunc, he thought morosely, too no-account to even keep his razor sharp.

Evalina was setting the table while he shaved. She said, "You're not really like this, Dan. Mrs. Eastwood is telling everyone what you done."

Clayton scowled. "Young people," he said, "ain't got enough gratitude. An' old one's got too much." He rinsed the lather from his face and groped blindly for a towel. He felt the warmth and softness of her hand like a shock as she put a towel into his hand. He involuntarily drew away from her as he dried his face. When he looked up again, she was busy at the table.

"Anyway," he said, "I've got plenty." She said, "I just fixed you a plate, Dan. Eat before it gets cold."

He sat at the table and ate hungrily and methodically and without self-consciousness. She poured herself a cup of coffee and leaned her elbows on the table and stared at him as he ate.

"Emil's asked me to move," she said.

He nodded. "He's wonderin' where you'll get the rent," Clayton said. "But don't you worry, Evaline. There's a big place out at the ranch—"

She said, "Dan, I think I'm going to cry."

She rose and went to the window and stood with her back to him. He finished eating and she turned and said, helplessly, "I suppose there's nothing else I can do. Even the sewing jobs are gone."

"There's worse things," he said stonily, "than livin' at the Circle C." He had to steady himself then, to keep the lift out of his voice. To keep her from noticing that his heart was pumping twice as fast. He looked at her then and realized for the first time how badly he wanted her. So much it hurt him inside. He felt a coppery taste in his mouth from the strong desires in him and he looked hungrily at the soft swell of her breasts, at the whiteness of her arms and the soft gleaming coils of yellow hair.

He turned away so she couldn't see his face. "I'll bring around the horses first thing in the mornin'," he said gruffly.

THE chase went on after Clayton turned Evalina over to Mattie Hernandez, his Mexican housekeeper. He picked up Hobe Batson in the deserted mine hut in Devil Canyon and sunk a .30 caliber rifle ball in Batson's coffee pot on the second morning after he'd taken Evalina to the ranch. He knew Batson didn't know whether it was poor shooting or intentional and it gave him pleasure to see the haste with which Hobe Batson saddled and rode out at a mad gallop, bent low over his saddle as though he expected another shot to tear into him. Clayton followed the man for two days and then pulled back to change horses and check the ranch—and see Evalina.

Preacher Sam Coburn was there that morning when Clayton rode in, haggard, hungry and unshaven. There was a worried air on the kindly old man's wrinkled face as he got up from his seat on a sawhorse by the blacksmith shop and walked over to where Clayton was unsaddling.

Preacher Sam didn't waste any words. "I'm a-fearing for your soul, Dan," he said. "An' more than that, there's talk about you and Evalina."

"Don't your bible teach an eye for an eye?" Dan asked, throwing his saddle on a peg in the barn. "That's all I'm after, preacher."

Preacher Sam shook his white head.

"That kind of justice, Dan," he said sadly, "is for them who make the laws."

"I don't make 'em around here," Dan said coolly, "but I got a lot t' do with it. That's close enough for me."

"Dan, Dan," murmured Preacher Sam with real distress in his voice, "but what about the Widow Clayton?"

For a moment Dan had to think about who the preacher meant. Then he laughed. "You ask her," he said. "Ask her what she thinks about it."

"I have, the poor child," Preacher Sam said. "She's mighty unhappy, Dan. She don't know what to do."

"If we got married up," Dan said slowly and he dusted his clothing as he spoke so he wouldn't have to look at the preacher, "that'd make it all right about that end o' it, wouldn't it?"

Preacher Sam got an unhappy look in his eyes. "Then I wasn't wrong about it," he murmured almost to himself. "I seen the look on your face. At the funeral too, Dan."

"Well, what about it?" Dan demanded roughly. "I'm not tryin' to hide what's in my heart for her. But I can't tell her. She fair hates me. But you—you're used to usin' lots o' words what sound good. You tell her. You tell her I'll be good to her and treat her right. An' I'll see you get that new church you been houndin' Phil Gallagher for. You'll never get it from Phil. A banker's got too much sense to go puttin' his long green on somethin' like that."

Preacher Sam rolled his eyes at the sky. "Lord help you, Dan," he said. "But you're honest and hard-workin'. That should count for somethin' and I'm askin' Him to remember it. But I'll see her."

"Do that," Dan said. "I'm saddlin' a fresh hoss and when I come back my job'll be done and maybe you'll have things fixed for me."

"I'm gonna pray for you, Dan," said Preacher Sam.

Dan led his fresh horse down by the cook shack. He went in and watched Bull Huey pulling a big roast out of his cooking oven.

"Cut me a couple o' slices off that roast, Bull," Dan said and pulled a bench away from the table and sat down, reaching for a cold biscuit.

"Mattie done told me not to feed you down here," Bull grumbled. "Said my cookin'd ruin your stummick." He ran his knife along the edge of his cook stove. "That Mex cookin' more likely t' ruin a man's gut."

"I'm gonna run the whole mess of you off," Dan growled, "one of these days."

The sound of a galloping horse came to them from outside. The sound made an abrupt halt and Sig Tremaine, Circle C riding boss came in. He said, "I been lookin' all over hell for you."

Clayton wolfed down his food and said, "You found me."

"We lost ever' dam one o' them two-year olds in Hinchey's meadow." Tremaine wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. "Three men drove 'em off."

Clayton drank a cup of warmish, rank and strong coffee. "Where was you and the boys?" he asked.

Sig Tremaine shook his head. "Boss, we ain't had a rustler here in ten years. I didn't check on 'em and the boys all busy on 'tother side."

Clayton wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, feeling the heavy growth of dark beard that covered his face. He got up and put on his hat and went outside and climbed on his horse.

Tremaine came to the door, amazement in the slack jaw and wide-opened eyes. "Boss, ain't y' gonna do nothin'?"

Clayton looked at him steadily. "I'm busy," he said. "I'm payin' you to look out for the spread. You can't do it, I'll get somebody else."

He started walking his horse away, back toward the mountains. Back to where he'd left Batson's trail.

Preacher Sam called to him from the ranchhouse and Clayton stopped his horse. The preacher motioned to him and Clayton turned and trotted his horse back to where the preacher waited. He saw Sig Tremaine sullenly untie his horse and ride off toward the east range.

The preacher put his hand on Dan's saddle horn, looking up at him. "She's willin', Dan," Preacher Sam said. "Soon's you get a license I can tie the knot good and tight."

"I got a license," Dan said.

"Then get off that horse," Preacher Sam said. "Go shave them whiskers off and wash your face so your bride'll see what she's gettin'."

"Ain't got time," Dan said and he stepped from the saddle.

"You live right an' you're a long time married," Preacher Sam said softly. "Evalina ain't no woman you can rush into somethin' with, Dan. She's a proper lady."

"She is or I wouldn't be wantin' to marry up with her," Dan said. "But she knows I'm a busy man, preacher."

The old man moved his thin shoulders. "That's a mighty important thing to a woman, Dan. You should ought to show her it's important to you, too."

"I reckon it is," Dan said, "but there's plenty o' time for one and not much for the other."

THEY were married in the big living room of the Circle C. A room that'd known only men. There amid the smell of saddle leather, sweaty blankets, with Mattie Hernandez for a witness, Preacher Sam Coburn said the words that didn't change Evalina's name but nonetheless made her Clayton's wife.

Afterwards, riding the uplands, Clayton was disturbed, still feeling the warm softness of her lips and seeing the almost frightened look in her dark eyes. That was when she raised her lips to him. He had a powerful urge to turn back off Hobe Bat-

son's trail. He crushed it down, reminding himself that Evalina probably wouldn't want to see him on their wedding day. And anyway, there was Hobe to take care of at this moment.

Hobe Batson's trail suddenly became so clear Clayton stopped to consider it. The Texan had used considerable skill to cover his tracks except when he was running hard, close ahead. Now the marks were so plain, Clayton felt a warning sound somewhere deep in his mind. He sat there, looking and listening.

Here the canyon flattened out, close to the summit of the Rio Lita's. Flattened until it was little more than a shallow ravine, covered with scrubby oak brush and stunted cedar. The trail followed the dry wash and ahead was a tangle of more of the brushy oak, the leaves a brilliant mass of color. The trail disappeared there and he knew the canyon ran out on top and on the other side was a labyrinth of smaller canyons, leading down into the other range.

He pushed his horse off the trail and into the brush and circled widely. He went around a big rock and up over a small saddle and came out above where he took off from the trail. He climbed above and beyond, so that he had the tangled patch of scrub oak below him. He got off his horse and squatted, watching closely.

It was five minutes before he saw something move. With that movement he picked up the form of Hobe Batson, lying in the brush, waiting, his carbine lying between two stones. Batson's horse was tied back in the brush, cropping the scanty stand of grass.

Clayton got his saddle gun from the boot and lay down full length on the ground. He got the ivory tip in the rear buckhorn and holding his breath he squeezed the trigger. The sound was still echoing down the canyon when Hobe Batson got on his horse. Clayton shot again, this time in the air, and he watched, smiling crookedly, as Batson plunged recklessly down the canyon, hat-

less now. Dan had knocked it from Batson's head with his first shot.

There was a click of shod hoofs on rock and Clayton stood shielded by his horse holding the Winchester across his saddle as Cam Johnson rode over the summit. A half dozen riders reined in behind the sheriff.

Clayton put his rifle in the boot and got in his saddle.

Cam said, "Wait a minute, Dan." He took his time about building a cigarette and the horses of the possemen were restless and heaving with the climb and an occasional low-voice word was dropped here and there.

Clayton knew all the possemen. He waited, an impatience on him. He didn't want a posse trailing along with him. Eventually Hobe Batson would stand and fight. Clayton didn't want spectators then.

Johnson got his cigarette going. "I heard a couple of shots. Yours?"

Clayton nodded. "Hobe Batson just rode down the canyon," he said.

Johnson nodded, pulling at his scraggly sandy mustache. "See anybuddy else?"

Clayton shook his head impatiently. "I'm not lookin' for anybody else," he said.

Johnson said, "Phil Gallagher's dead, Dan. Shot down this mornin'. Bank robbed. They cleaned it out."

"They? Who're they?" Dan asked, remembering back to the time when Phil Gallagher'd put him on the road to wealth and influence.

Johnson deliberately pinched out the fire on his cigaret and dropped the dead butt on the ground. "Three men, Dan. Don't know them. But maybe same bunch that run off your herd. You got the whole county upset, Dan." He ended on an accusing, aggrieved note.

"Me? What've I got to do with it?" Clayton demanded.

"Hobe Batson's been leadin' us all over creation," Johnson said ominously. "While his buddies rob and steal. That's how."

There was a sickness inside Dan Clayton when Johnson's words became clear to him. So it wasn't he playing with Hobe Batson, but just the opposite. Hobe Batson had been playing with him. And now, this day, Hobe had decided to end the game. Involuntarily, Clayton looked over his shoulder. In the space of ten minutes and a dozen words, he'd become the hunted instead of the hunter. He moved his big shoulders uneasily. Maybe he had it coming. "Don't see why you're tryin' to blame me," he grumbled.

"Gimme that star, Dan," Cam Johnson said, holding out his hand.

Wordlessly, Clayton passed the deputy sheriff's badge to Johnson. He touched his horse with his spurs and jogged down the canyon. It couldn't make too much difference, he thought.

CHAPTER

3

Burned Out

The red-brick bank was closed but a director's meeting was going on. Clayton left his horse at the watering trough just below the bank and walked on down and rapped on the door.

Wade McCue, a stoop-shouldered white-haired old man, the teller, let him in. "They're in back, Mr. Clayton," he said.

Clayton went past the cage, stepping over the pool of dried blood before the barred window and pushed open the door of the conference room. He looked at the stony-faced ranchers and businessmen who fell silent as he stood there.

Emil Madden said, "Come on in, Dan."

"Yeah," Asa Budd snorted. "Git the bad news, Dan."

Opherd Dikes rapped on the table with his knuckles and they all fell silent as Dan advanced to the table and stood there looking at Opherd's round red face.

"What bad news?" he wanted to know.

Opherd looked quickly around the table and then let his small eyes rest on Clayton.

"We're wiped out, Dan," he said, with a helpless motion of his hands. "All we got left is paper."

"That's good enough for me," Dan growled.

Opherd swore gustily. "Look dammit," he said, "it's our paper. Can you pay up? I know I can't. How 'bout the rest o' you?"

They all shook their heads in unison. "Not me," Madden said. "It's all I can do to make the principal and interest."

"Let's don't get excited," Dan said bluntly. "What's the difference? In time, cash will build up. As we make our payments—"

"Wait a minute, Dan," Opherd interrupted. "Phil made a few bad guesses. He's got mortgages on some o' them dirt farmers who ain't even got their places proved out. We couldn't foreclose on 'em if we wanted to."

"They makin' their payments?" Dan growled, this business unsettling him. He kept thinking of Hobe Batson making a fool of him and it'd suddenly occurred to him that Hobe might pay a visit to the Circle C. His jaw tightened at the thought of that.

Opherd waved his hands. "Some are and some ain't," he cried. "But the worst is the examiner's comin'. To check the books. We're gonna have to call in as much as we can—"

"You tend to it," Clayton said. "I got no time for such foolishness, Opherd. There's other things eatin' on me."

"Like Hobe Baston?" Opherd asked softly.

Clayton stopped at the door and turned slowly. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Like Hobe Batson."

Emil Madden stood up, cracking his knuckles. "Dan, we're not careful, we're all goin' down the creek," he cried. "Everything we got's tied up here. You're in deeper'n any of us."

"I'm not worryin' about it," Clayton said. "Phil Gallagher was a good man. I

trusted him alive. I still do now he's dead."

Opherd was standing too, his pudgy hands gripping the table edge. "A dead man," he said, "ain't got nothin' to say about nothin', Dan."

Clayton closed the door behind him. He stood there for a moment, watching the bent shoulders of Wade McCue huddled over the bank books. He asked, "How much'd they get, Wade?"

McCue turned on his high stool. "Nigh onto eighty thousand, Mr. Clayton. I'll have the exact figures in a little while."

Dan whistled softly. "That's a sight of money," he said.

Wade McCue quaveringly agreed.

ALL the loose stock in the upper valley above Circle C gave Clayton some indication that something was wrong. He drove his horse hard that last three miles.

Thin streamers of blue smoke rose from the blackened ashes of his barn. This much he saw when he broke out of the timber and put the weary horse into a rough gallop. The barn was gone. The kitchen lean-to on the main ranch house was gutted with fire.

Mattie Hernandez came out of the house with her apron to her eyes and he could hear her shrill cries above the pounding of his horses' hoofs.

He got down from his horse, his heart heavy inside of him and a suffocating feeling in his chest.

"Where's Evalina?" he asked roughly.

She came out of the door then and leaned against a porch post and regarded him with her level gray eyes.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Get me some chuck," he told Mattie roughly, more to shut up her howling than because he was hungry. He looked up at Evalina. "What happened?"

Sig Tremaine came out of the bunkhouse and weaved over to Clayton. His clothing was scorched and torn and his face held a blister or two that showed up beneath the

soot. He said, with a bitter twist to his mouth, "We got burned out, boss."

"Where's the boys?" Clayton demanded bluntly.

"Out trackin'," Sig said. "All that ain't laid up."

Clayton jerked the saddle off his horse and threw the saddle on the porch. He walked up and down, his jaw working, his eyes blazing. Finally he stopped in front of Tremaine. "Well, dammit, I'm waitin'," he cried. "Do I have to pry it out with a crowbar?"

Tremaine shook his head. "Boss," he said slowly, "I don't know how to tell it: Shorty was in the Burnt Mountain line shack and he come in about midnight, bleedin' like a stuck steer from a bullet hole in his leg. Said our last bunch o' steers was being rustled."

Clayton waited, his rage and frustration mounting as he listened. "Can't leave it alone for a minute," he muttered. "Not a minute."

Sig drew in a deep breath. "Well, we all lit out for Burnt Mountain. We got up there, the stuff was all gone. Nobuddy around. Too dark to track so we all come back fer grub and sich. When we got here, she wuz a-burnin'. The barn and house. We tried to put it out here on 'count o' Miz Clayton. She run us down to th' barn, but 'twas too late."

"How about the stock?" Clayton felt sick.

"We saved most o' 'em," Tremaine said.

"All right," Clayton said heavily. "Now listen to me, Sig. I got cleaned out in that bank robbery in One Step. I got enough cash to pay you off and the boys—and that's it."

Sig Tremaine stood there with a troubled look on his seamed face. "Hell, boss," he said, "th' boys can wait. Me too. We'll stick it."

"You won't stick it," Clayton said shortly. "I'm beholden to no man, Sig. When I'm in the clear again, I'll look you up."

"You find the boys and bring 'em in and pay 'em off."

When Sig Tremaine had ridden off over the ridge, Evalina said, "Mattie has something for you, Dan. Eat and then sleep for a bit. You need it."

There was a strong dissatisfaction in Clayton. A streak of premonition too. He growled, "What I need is a fresh horse."

She sat beside him there on the porch and put her hand on his shoulder. "You're going again?" she asked. "You haven't had enough of the blood trail, Dan?"

Clayton's hands clinched on his leather covered thighs. "He's been playin' with me," he muttered thickly. "Playin'!"

"Dan, Dan," she cried softly, "forget it for just a little while, please. If you don't—"

"If I don't I'll be sorry, huh?" he snarled. He stood up and her hand fell to her side. "I'll catch up with that ranny some day."

When he was finished with Mattie's stew he found he was inordinately tired. He went clumping through the house and pushed open the door to his bedroom. He stopped there, gaping.

There was curtains over the window. Filmy, lacy, feminine curtains that waved gently before the easy wind that came through the open window. There was a big mirror over a chest of drawers he didn't remember seeing before. The dresser was covered with strange and mysterious boxes and jars. But over all was an overpowering aura that was Evalina.

The crocheted cover on the bed and the silken pillow with yellow and green flowers on a black background made him suck in his breath audibly. He turned and closed the door. Evalina stood there looking at him, her lips parted, her gray eyes wide.

He blurted, "I didn't know—I used to sleep there—"

"It's still your bedroom," she said coolly. "I'm your wife, Dan. Or have you forgotten?"

All thoughts of his loss and his ven-

geance fled before the hunger for her that mounted in him. He said, "I haven't forgot." His mouth was dry and he felt his knees quiver. He wanted to tell her he couldn't come to her, without knowing she wanted him too, but his thoughts were all confused and the words wouldn't get together. So he said, "I'll bunk with—at the bunkhouse."

"I'd rather you didn't," she said, with her eyes on the floor. "They'll be coming back soon. God knows what stories they've carried into town now."

"There isn't anything," Dan said curtly, "they could say."

"People don't need the truth," Evalina said.

"You're beginnin' to sound like me," he said dryly.

She brushed by him. "You take the bed," she said. "You need rest. I'll sit here and sew until I get sleepy."

Dan lay there in the bed, watching the lamplight play on her hair as the knitting needles clicked and clacked. They seemed to lull him, to take away the taut, gnawing feeling that plagued his guts. Since Dunc was killed. That's when it started. He felt drowsy and somehow contented. It was a strange feeling and he wondered about it. *Here I am*, he thought, *just about where I started—busted, broke and in trouble. And just as happy as if I had some sense.* He didn't know it but he was smiling when he went to sleep.

HE CAME awake suddenly rising swiftly on one elbow. The light was turned low. Evalina's hair glinted in the lamplight as she stirred, her eyes opening sleepily. Dan came out of bed and padded in his bare feet to the door, lifting a gun from the bedpost as he passed it.

He pushed open the door and went swiftly down the hall and paused at the front door. "Who's there?"

"It's me, boss." It was Sig Tremaine's voice.

Dan pushed the door open. "Come on in, Sig. I won't light a light."

Tremaine's big form filled the door and he closed it behind him. His voice was filled with an inner excitement Dan could feel.

"They're all camped out at Rock Corral," he said. "Hobe and three others."

"You're sure?" Dan asked, his voice tight but even.

"Shore am. Saw their little-bitty campfire. Left my hoss and the boys and crawled up there. I seen the fire shine on Hobe's gold teeth. Him all right."

"Thanks, Sig," Dan said. He reached out and pulled open the door and said again, "Thanks."

Sig stood there. "You want me along?" His voice held a hurt note.

"This's my show, Sig," Dan said. "I'll do it."

"But they's three of them," Sig protested. "You'll git what Dunc got."

"Maybe."

"Listen, boss," Sig said. "Wages don't matter. Me an' the boys, we don't give a damn 'bout that. We figger—"

"Don't worry about it," Dan said with some coldness. He pulled the door open wider. "See you, Sig."

The big foreman moved out on the porch. He stood there indecisively for a moment and then he clumped down the steps and mounted his horse and moved out into the darkness.

Dan closed the door. He stood there for a moment knowing Evalina was close by him.

"You're hard on your friends," she said.

"I'm not aimin' to owe any man," he said.

"You've lived all your life in this country," she said wonderingly. "I haven't been here so long, Dan. But I know better than that."

"What?" he asked shortly.

"Why, that you owe it to your friends to let them help."

"I'll help myself," he said with that hardness in him he couldn't help. He heard her sigh in the darkness and sensed the motion of her body and felt her hand on his arm. His arm tingled and suddenly he ached for her.

"You remember that big man in One Step?" she asked. "The black-mustached man? McDermitt's his name. He wanted Stinking Springs, Dan."

His mind, busy on other things didn't follow at once. He remembered McDermitt though. "What for?" he asked.

"He says there's oil there, Dan. He offered me a lot of money for the land."

"So?"

She shook his arm lightly. "Don't you see, Dan. You don't—you—we're married, Dan. It's as much yours as mine."

"What're you drivin' at?" he asked, a harsh note creeping into his voice.

"Just that you don't have to go running out of here like a crazy man," she said crossly. "Trying to get back your money—or bring Hobe Batson in."

He didn't answer but pushed by her and went down the hallway and into the bedroom. He was stamping his boots on when she came in and regarded him with her level gray eyes. There was something else in her face now, something that troubled him.

She said, "Don't go, Dan."

He got his boots on and he took the Colt out of his waistband and shoved it back in his holster and then buckled the gunbelt around his hips. He said, "Nothin' is so different now, Evalina."

She took a step toward him. "But it is, Dan. I—I—" She stopped.

He slipped on his jacket and lifted his hat from the floor and swung, staring at her, aching for her but knowing she wasn't for him. He might as well face it, he told himself.

"It is different, Dan," she said again, her eyes on the floor. "Don't go."

He shook his head wonderingly, as he

cried softly, "What is it, woman? Why do you nag at me about this?"

Her eyes were flashing when she lifted her head. "Nag? So it's nagging when I try to make you like a man instead of a bully boy? You've nearly ruined yourself trying to avenge someone who meant nothing to you."

She lifted her hand imperiously when he started to speak. "No, Dunc meant nothing to you. It's just your pride, your selfish pride. You thought you was expected to do something and come hell or highwater you're doing it. And it's ruined you, wrecked the ranch, lost the money you've been years and years saving—and you keep on till it'll be the death of you."

He stepped swiftly across the room and stopped at the door. "Look for me when you see me comin'," he said and jerked the door open.

"You go," she cried, "and I won't be here when you come back."

That stopped him momentarily. He came slowly back to her and stood looking down at her, at the brightness of her eyes, the set of her lips. He could see a tiny pulse throbbing at her throat. His long arm reached out and pulled her against him, hard and demanding. Her lips were hard and set but suddenly they softened and warmed and her arms went up to his shoulders pulled him to her.

They stepped apart, both surprised. Dan backed away and reached for the door again. "You'll be here," he said huskily.

WAITING there in the half-light at Rock Corral, Dan thought it seemed like a lifetime since he'd rode up there after Batson stood off the posse. He crouched in the rocks of the inner rim. He'd left his horse a mile below and walked. He didn't smoke. He sat there, unemotional, cold and hard, waiting.

The outlaws stirred at daybreak. Hobe Batson rolled out first and built up a little fire, squatting there, feeding twigs into it.

When it was going he still hunkered there, warming his hands.

While Dan watched the outlaw picked up a handful of stones and started tossing them at the blanketed figures sprawled on the other side of the fire.

The others rolled out slowly and profanely. When the four of them were around the fire, Dan cocked his .45. The sound was loud and ominous in the thin air and all four of them stiffened with the sound.

"First one moves gets it," Dan said.

They looked cautiously in all directions, their hands creeping to their shoulders.

"You Batson," Dan said. "Start walking backward till I tell you to stop."

The outlaw stood there motionless.

"Start," Dan said in an ugly voice.

The outlaw stepped gingerly backward.

"Right there," Dan said and Batson stopped. Dan reached out and lifted Batson's gun and let it drop. He put his hand in the small of Batson's back and shoved hard and the outlaw went sprawling. "Now, you, come the same way."

He had their guns at his feet. He came out from behind his rock and looked at them with glittering eyes. He looked at Batson for a long while and then the other three, all strangers, all hard case. "Where'd you pick up this crew, Hobe?" he asked.

Batson was silent. The others eyed Dan with hard set faces.

Keeping his gun on them, Dan went around the fire and kicked the blankets apart. He checked the saddlebags and then he came back. "All right," he said. He pointed his gun at one of the men and said, "Get that rope off your saddle and tie the others up."

The man complied and when Batson and the other two were tied, Dan swung on the man who'd done the tying. "Where's the money you took from the bank?"

The man, dark and lean with a harelip said, "Try and find it."

"That's what I aim t' do," Dan said. He reached down, keeping his eye and gun

on the man and got one of the guns he'd taken from the outlaws. Slowly, he holstered his own gun and then threw the other gun to the man's feet and stood there looking at the dark-featured gunman.

The two men stared at each other silently. Then the dark man made his play. He threw himself toward the gun and seemed to curl around it. Dan's hand slapped down and their guns went off together. The dark man triggered one shot that screamed off the rocks behind Dan, before he drew his hands under him and arched his back and dropped.

Dan Clayton reloaded his gun and got out his knife and went over and cut one of the others loose, a sandy-haired, bow-legged man who stared boldly at Dan.

"You know where that money is?" Dan asked.

"Yep," the man said laconically.

"You goin' to tell?"

"Nope. Just gimme that gun."

"You get you chance," Clayton growled. He walked back to the pile of rocks and holstered his own gun and bent, reaching for another gun. He rose quickly, but the sandy-haired man was on him before he could trigger the Colt. Something hard crashed against his head. He staggered back, his boots slipping on the rocks. The sandy-haired man slammed him in the head again and he went down in a welter of stars.

CLAYTON awoke with water in his face. Hobe Batson straddled him, letting water from a canteen dribble in Clayton's face. Dan rolled over against Batson's leg and the man with the gold-tipped teeth ran his spur down Clayton's side, the rowels biting through his clothing into his flesh.

"Hey, Sandy," Batson yelled. "Bring it here."

The sandy-haired man came over holding a bulky canvas sack carelessly in one hand.

Batson took the sack from Sandy and

swung around, grinning at Clayton. "Here's the money, Clayton," he said. "You still want it?" He swung the sack through the air.

Dan swung his head aside but the sack caught him alongside the temple and his senses reeled as his head thumped against the ground. He was conscious of Batson methodically swinging the coin and bill-filled sack again and again. He struggled against the overwhelming darkness and rolled over. He got to his hands and knees, swinging his head from side to side. He could see Batson's legs and the outlaw came toward him. Clayton gathered himself and dove into the legs and they went rolling over and over, with Dan's fingers trying for Batson's throat.

There were yells and shouts and a gun went off. Dan kept trying to get his hands on Batson's windpipe and his weight bore the outlaw down to the ground, his big fingers tearing and squeezing. He felt hands on his shoulders and he tried to fight them off, conscious of only one desire—to squeeze the life out of Batson with his bare hands.

"Hold it, boss, hold it!" It was Sig Tremaine. He pulled Clayton off Batson and the other Circle C hands pinned Hobe to the ground. Sig said, "Dammit, you should a' took us along, boss."

Clayton sat there shaking, his breath a shallow rattle in his throat. "Yeah," he said. "Guess I should have, Sig." He meant it.

Down there in town, after the money had been returned to the bank and Hobe Batson and his men turned over to Cam Johnson, Clayton stopped at Madden's saloon.

Emil came from behind his bar, wiping his hands on his apron. He said, "Listen to this, Dan, I don't want you to hold it against me. I'm sorry, but I just couldn't help myself."

"What're you talking about, Emil?" growled Dan. He looked past Emil at the

crowd of people in the saloon. He nodded to them. "Hi, boys."

They were surprised, he could tell. But they nodded and one or two of them grinned at him and threw up a hand and here and there was a murmur that was not at all unfriendly.

"Why, Evalina," Emil said. "She's got her house back. I couldn't say no, Dan. I couldn't do it."

"It's all right, Emil," Dan said. He turned away, leaving Emil with a surprised look on his face.

Outside, he stood indecisively for a moment. He heard her voice then and he looked up. She stood there on the boardwalk and her gray eyes were on him, patient, awaiting his words.

"You left, huh?"

She moved to him saying nothing.

"Rich woman with all that oil stuff," he said soberly. "You won't be needin' me, huh?"

Her voice was soft and easy and made him remember the night before, when he'd had her in his arms in their bedroom.

"It's all a fake, Dan. There isn't any oil. Guess he was just trying to pull a crooked deal."

Dan raised his head, trying to keep the exultation down. "Whyn't you come back to the ranch?" he asked. "Maybe—just maybe—" He stopped. He'd been on the verge of saying that maybe she could learn

to like him a little. Especially since he wasn't going around shoving people out of his way any longer.

She said, "I'd like to go home, Dan. My things are in the hotel."

"I'll get them," he said, his heart beginning to pump inside of him.

"No, I will," she said hastily and went swiftly across the street without waiting for him.

Evalina pushed open the door and went into the hotel. McDermitt came to meet her, holding his hat in his hand, smiling happily.

"You're all ready, Miss Evalina?" he asked.

She regarded him with her level gray eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. "Stinking Springs isn't for sale."

McDermitt's eyes clouded. "But—but you said—"

She said primly, "A woman can change her mind, Mr. McDermitt."

He was twisting his hat in his hands. "But all that oil—all that money waiting to be—"

She was still prim. "I'm sorry," she said. "My—my husband is waiting for me." She got her valise and went toward the door. Through the door she could see Dan Clayton standing there, looking hopefully at the hotel door. She came outside and she smiled at him and he smiled back at her and came across the streets with long strides, to meet her. ● ● ●

AMAZING THING! By Cooper

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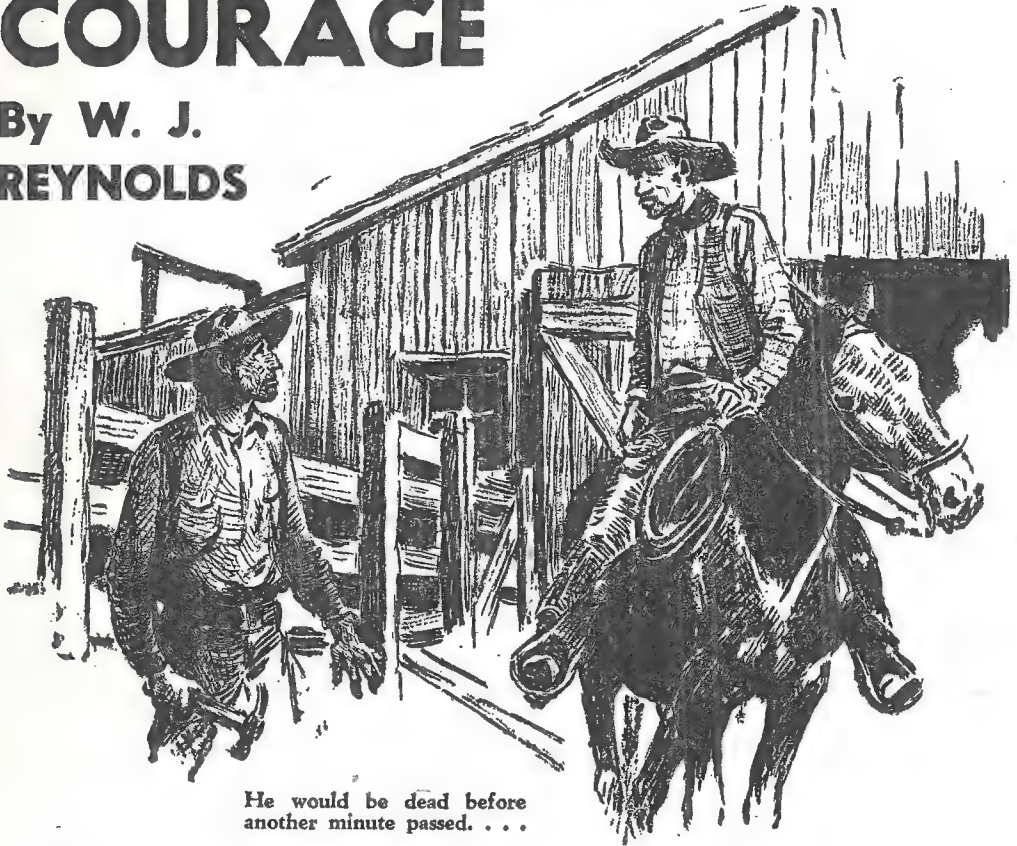


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CLODHOPPER COURAGE

By W. J.
REYNOLDS



He would be dead before
another minute passed. . . .

Try to stop a landslide with your bare hands if you want to, but stay clear of Jess Bond when that mad nester comes roaring up the street with a shotgun in his hands and a look of crazed fear in his eyes!

DESPITE his nervous alertness, Jess Bond didn't see Tacko until the hired killer rode around the corner of the barn and pulled his bay horse to a stop ten feet away. Shock sent weakness through Jess, and he felt the flutter in his breast and the stiffness in his head. With half of his mind he cursed his fright, while the other half tried to accept the situation and think of some way out of it. He just stood there and stared at Tacko with the claw hammer half lifted to drive the nail into the heavy plank on the corral.

Tacko sat the bay and looked back at Jess with his frozen blue stare, that blank, terrible look that had weakened many a man tougher than Jess. Flashes of gossip he had heard passed through Jess' head, things said and believed of Tacko. Eleven notches on that black-handled gun. All killed from behind, some said, others claimed Tacko gave another gun rep a chance, but nesters and such he shot where he found them; back or front it made no difference to Tacko. No risk, anyway.

When Ring Bolt wanted a man killed

he just mentioned that man's name where Tacko could hear it, and not long afterwards that man was found dead. Jess didn't doubt that either. He knew it was so. He looked at those eyes now and the smooth brown face that looked as though a man couldn't drive a nail into it, and knew also that he was a dead man himself.

The shorthorn bull in the small corral pawed the earth and rumbled threateningly at this horseman. Furious anger born of fear coursed through Jess. That damn bull was the cause of it all! He cursed the bull and the luck that had sent him after it to the middle valley day before yesterday; he cursed the luck that had sent him up there and made him witness to a man's murder. Jess Bond had seen Tacko ride up and shoot a man dead, a nester.

"Ambition," Tacko said conversationally, "kills men. There's the ambition to own a whole valley that gets men killed, then there's ambition like yours, Bond. You wanted to improve your herd so you go to the middle valley to buy a bull. You saw something you wasn't meant to see. Now you get killed." Tacko lifted a shoulder and his stare did not waver or change.

Wildness ran through Jess. He wanted wildly to run, and he wanted to tear Tacko to pieces and stomp the pieces into the corral dust. He wanted to live just as bad as anybody, and he didn't want to be killed right here in his front yard, under his wife's nose. He wanted to scream, but no sound would come from his mouth.

He would be dead before another minute passed....

"I hate to shoot womenfolks," Tacko said. "You reckon your wife will have sense enough to leave the country?"

Jess' brain froze and he could see nothing but Tacko there in front of him, his brown hand moving for his pistol. Jess hurled the hammer without conscious thought, a wild and formless cry bursting from his lips.

The hammer struck Tacko between the eyes, and the half lifted pistol fell as Tacko

reeled in the saddle. The horse twisted nervously, but it had been trained with care to stand, and it held its ground. It stood even as Jess Bond charged furiously, feeling the pain in his throat, knowing he was shouting wild oaths, unable to stop.

His frenzied hands clawed Tacko from the saddle, hurled the gunman to the ground violently, and sent a fury of blows upon the fallen killer. It was several moments before Jess realized that all resistance had gone from the gunman, and he lay partly propped on his hands, breath bubbling through the blood on his face and in his nose and mouth.

A thought made its way into Jess, he had to have his gun, he had to kill Tacko before the gunman killed him. Tacko would haunt his trail the rest of his life, and at any time the huge .45 might blast out his life. Tacko would never rest....

Tacko groaned and struggled to his hands and knees, hung there, and the sight galvanized Jess to action. He rushed for the cabin a hundred yards away, yelling for Allie to bring his gun.

"Allie!" he bawled hoarsely. "Allie, bring my gun, damn it! Get my gun!" He ran furiously.

HE SAW Allie in the doorway, the fear in her obvious from his distance. Suddenly she began jumping up and down and screaming. "Run, Jess! Run, Jess!"

Wild curses rose in Jess Bond's throat and spilled out his lips. Allie was a fool, and didn't have the sense God gave a gnat. Damn it, if she'd hand him his gun before Tacko came to and killed them all—

Then it came to Jess that Tacko's gun was lying somewhere near the killer, where it had fallen from his hand when Jess had hit him. It was right there where Tacko could pick it up and start shooting, or where Jess could have picked it up if he had had sense enough.

Jess skidded to a stop, made a half turn and seesawed with the crazy motion of a man who don't know which way to run.

Then he stopped dead still, eyes flaring as he saw Tacko come to his feet, and feel dizzily for his horse. Jess realized that he was closer to the house than to Tacko's gun.

He sprinted for the cabin, shoved Allie violently away from the door. He ripped his rifle from its pegs and wheeled back to the door. He saw Tacko climbing laboriously upon his horse, turning the animal away toward the rear of the barn and safety.

Jess jerked the rifle to his shoulder, eared back the hammer and pulled the trigger. A click answered him. Frantically, he kept cocking and pulling the trigger. Nothing but clicks.

"It won't fire!" he shouted at Allie.

She was screaming over and over, "Shoot, Jess! Shoot, Jess!"

"The damned thing won't fire, I tell you!" he roared at her.

Tacko passed behind the barn and they heard his horse pick up to a gallop and the hoofbeats fade out.

Jess was shaking and staring at the rifle, turning it over and over in his hands, dumbly. Then slowly he levered it and pulled the trigger. The rifle cracked bluntly, and Allie jumped and screamed.

He hadn't had a shell in the chamber; he had been rattled plumb off his head. "I oughta be shot," he said aloud. "I'm a damned fool, Allie. I ought to be still wearing rompers."

His dejection brought Allie to him quickly, calming her. "You done good, Jess," she said. "You're an honest man and not a killer. Not many men could have been caught like you were and come out alive. You quit fretting."

It was late the next afternoon when Jess rode up to his cabin and dismounted as Allie unbarred and opened the door. "Is the sheriff going to arrest Tacko, Jess?" she asked worriedly, then added, "I ain't seen nobody around here."

"The sheriff is down to Yawley, in court, and investigating that killing down there. I saw his deputy, Wingo. He said he'd look

into it, but he didn't act much like he aimed to." His lips held a bitter twist. "Tybolt elects the law, he put Sheriff Carnes in the office, and Wingo. They aim to look out for Tybolt's interests.

Wrath, caused by the terror inside her, tightened Allie's lips. She burst out angrily, "It's a mighty shame when honest folks can't be safe in their own houses, when the law kowtows to a range hog like Tybolt who hires killers to shoot men wanted out of the way! It's about time the little farmers and stockmen elected their own law, honest men who'll enforce the law impartial and not bow down to the Tybolts. I aim to say so right out loud next time I'm in town."

The run in with Tacko yesterday, the jittery night and the ride to town today had sapped Jess Bond's energy. He said wearily, "I reckon you're right, Allie, but ain't nobody going to bring Tybolt's killer down on them by saying so, not until they're a lot madder than they are now."

"It's time they got mad then!" Allie flared.

Jess' hands shook a little as he rolled and lighted a smoke. "The folks are getting some stirred," he said. "I heard a lot of talk in town after word got out about me. Tybolt's got the lower valley and getting the middle part fast. It's just a matter of time till he gets here. Folks know that now and they're scared. If they get scared enough, like I done, they're liable to tear Tybolt apart. He's too high-handed and bull-headed to see it. He'll have to be met with a hangrope before he will, then it'll break him to pieces. Thing is, who'll be dead before that happens?"

The stiffness ran out of Allie. "What'll we do, Jess? If we can get the law to act, get enough men to make the sheriff do something, your testimony will hang Tacko and maybe Tybolt. Tybolt knows that, and Tacko too. They'll kill you—they won't let you live knowing what you do!"

"I don't know, Allie, I just don't know what to do. The boys in town talked mighty

mad till I suggested we get together, then they sort of backed up." His eyes suddenly flared, and his voice rose, "I'll be damned if I'll leave my farm just as I got it in shape!"

He wheeled and led his horse to the barn. The bull pawed and rumbled as he unsaddled and Jess stopped to glare at the big red animal. He cursed the bull. If he hadn't been down the valley after it, he wouldn't be in this mess; he wouldn't have seen Tacko kill a man.

The fire went out of Jess just as quickly as it came. That was foolish thinking, blaming his troubles on the bull. All he had done was hurry up things, Tybolt would have got over here before long anyway, the blame was to be placed on a man's greed, not on an animal.

He had to think of some way to meet Tacko. Tacko would be after him, he would kill to shut Jess' mouth even more viciously than he killed for money. Tacko would be here sometime. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow or tomorrow night. Jess Bond could only wait and wait, expecting to feel the shocking rip of a heavy bullet at any moment of the day or night. Jess Bond cursed with a rising anger.

FOR three days and two nights, Jess and Allie Bond waited for Tacko, and a thousand times they heard him in the night, sneaking around the barn, or sliding along the wall of the cabin. The nights were terrible in their length, the dread sapping their strength and ragging their nerves. Then the days were nearly as bad with Tacko behind every rock bigger than Jess' hat, or in every draw. They lost weight and their faces and eyes became sunken.

"It's the waiting," Jess said a hundred times. "I wish he'd come on and get it over."

"Maybe he was hurt worse than we thought, Jess," Allie said. "Maybe he won't come."

"He'll come," Jess said. "At times I'm

scared and know I've got to have some kind of edge to have a chance, then there's other times when I'd be willing to step out and match him in a shoot-out."

"I've heard my father say that all men were scared, especially a hard-working man who minded his own business," Allie said. "Such men hate to kill and to be forced into it makes them mad, but they usually do it when they have to, even scared, that's true courage. That's what my father always said."

Jess grinned wryly. "Men with true courage sure leads a dog's life, then, if they feel like I do!"

The third night, Jess said, "I'm staying out tonight, Allie. You bar the door. I'm going to see some of those noises tonight. If it's Tacko, when morning comes one of us will have coffee and the other won't!"

No amount of hysterical pleading could change him. His mind was set. He prowled a hundred yards beyond the cabin, approaching close to the barn occasionally, listening to the rustle of the rats and mice. A dozen times his finger quivered on the trigger of the cocked rifle, but always it was a false alarm of his nerves.

It was around midnight when he had no doubt that he caught the fleeting shadow melt into the barn. His jaw aching with the pressure of his teeth clamped together, Jess started inching that way. He was going to have this over once and for all.

He didn't know how long it took, but finally he was in the darkness of the stable and no bullet had come his way. He held the rifle in sweating hands and heard the rustle of the mice, temporarily subdued by his presence. He strained his eyes into the stables' darkness, letting the partition and the mangers come into darker shadows.

Satisfied that Tacko wasn't here, Jess started his inching way through the small passageway to the other side and the shed that opened into the corral. Tacko would likely choose that, figuring to wait until daylight and nail Jess as he left the house.

Halfway through the passageway, Jess suddenly froze. There was the pad of a foot over there, and mice scurried, squeaking under the crib to become silent. Only an alien presence would cause that. Setting his feet with extreme care, Jess eased on a little more, to the edge of the crib where the shed opened up.

Then the dark shadow reared up before him, Jesse felt the heat of an expelled breath.

The shock of discovery, the terror and the report of the rifle were simultaneous. Jess knew he squalled like a banshee and had the irrelevant thought that he knew now why Indians used the warwhoop. It served the double purpose of releasing pent feelings and paralyzing the enemy. The rifle cracked rapidly as Jess levered and fired, pumping bullets into that shape before him.

A heavy body fell and powerful legs thrashed the manure-littered floor. Then a bubbling moan and silence.

Jess didn't know how long he stood there, frozen, hearing Allie's screams from the house. He knew without doubt that he had killed his bull. In blind nervous spookiness, he had shot his bull dead. Still strange here, it hadn't bedded down and was eating wisps of hay that hung from the sides of the crib, fallen from the loft. It was the bull that had frightened the rats, not yet used to its presence.

At daylight when Jess still lingered over his coffee, Allie said softly, "Jess, don't you aim to butcher out the bull?"

He didn't look up. "No."

"But, Jess—"

He looked up then, his hollowed eyes gentle, but with a new and strangely hard light in them. "No, Allie, it isn't mine to butcher. That bull belongs to Tybolt, he bought it last night. I aim to collect today."

Her eyes grew wide with alarm. "Jess, what are you aiming to do?"

"First, I'm going to town and leave word for Tacko to meet me there if he ain't too

yellow. Then I'm aiming to go collect a bull from Tybolt, or me and him will have a little round. My mind's made up. Look what cringing and worrying and hiding my head has got me. You're wore to a nub, scared because your husband is scared. We got a right to expect peace on our own place." He stood up suddenly and slammed his fist on the table so that a cup leaped off to crash on the floor. "I ain't aiming to have it, this sneaking around my own place. I aim to have peace if I have to shoot somebody to dollrags to get it! And if you got any say to say, well say it—I ain't got much time to listen, I'm heading for town!"

Allie looked at him with wide eyes then she said tonelessly, "I ain't got anything to say, Jess. It wouldn't do any good now."

IT WAS an hour before noon when they drove the wagon into the little town of Wigley. Jess tied the team behind the row of stores and helped Allie down. Despite her protests, he sent her stepping for the Boltons a hundred yards beyond the last store. Then Jess turned toward Haversham's store and went in the back door.

Haversham and two other men, farmers, were talking at the counter. They stared at Jess with big eyes. Haversham burst out, "Jess, for God's sake, don't you know. Tacko is in town and saying he's going to put a bullet in you?"

"I didn't know it," Jess said, "but I'm glad to hear it. I come to town to take care of Tacko, I aim to get this settled."

"Tybolt's here, too," one farmer said. "He ain't associatin' with Tacko, but any fool would know he's here to see Tacko shuts you up."

They poured questions at Jess for the details of his fight, and the murder he had witnessed. Jess obliged them, it seemed to ease him a little to talk. "I been scared to death," Jess finished. "It ain't right that a man has to live like I been the last three days, Allie's near ready for a breakdown. I aim to face up to Wingo and see what he

aims to do, demand an answer, if he won't do nothing, then I will. That may not be much, but I'll have tried."

"Wingo ain't doin' nothing," Haversham said. "He won't either."

"If we'd all get together we could handle Tybolt and Tacko, and elect our own law," Jess said. "What do you fellers think?"

He found out. With hastily muttered excuses, they left. Haversham smiled sourly at Jess. "Well, there it is, Jess, it was too quick and they ain't been hit yet. They're scared, but get the right situation they'd back you as a body, but not too quick."

Jess nodded. "I didn't expect them too, right off. But they'll talk it up and get that much closer."

"They'll talk, all right," Haversham agreed. "Tacko will know you're in town, too. You better forget about fighting him, Jess. Wait for the crowd."

Jess rubbed the butt of Tacko's big pistol in his waistband. "I'll wait here till Tacko sends word that he's ready."

Fifteen minutes later, Wingo shoved into the store, ramming the door back violently. He faced Jess on wide-braced legs and his red face wore an angry scowl.

"Bond," he ordered angrily, "get in your wagon and get the hell out of town! I ain't havin' no riot here. I'll throw the whole damn lot of nesters in jail. They're knotted up out there like a bunch of sheep, blabbin' about what they're going to do!"

"First," Jess said, "what have you done about arresting Tacko for murder? What have you done about him trying to murder me?"

Wingo's face became even redder. "Listen, you damn clodhopper, get out of town, hear me?"

"That's what I thought," Jess said. "You can go to hell. I don't mind your kind of law." Jess' hand closed on the butt of Tacko's pistol.

Wingo made a move for his own gun and Jess jerked the pistol out to cover Wingo. Jess said with rising anger, "You ain't no

law, Wingo, you're Tybolt's jackal. I'm holding the kind of law you represent. I'll put a bullet right through your gut if you open your mouth just once more. Now get out of this store before I count three, or I'll do it anyway!" His face was congested with the rush of blood and such a violent hate for what Wingo represented—the thing that had gotten him, Jess Bond, into this mess—flooded him that Jess knew with certainty that he would kill the deputy.

Wingo stared at Jess and his own face went white, and his eyes grew wider as he backed for the door. He kept licking his lips. He darted a hasty glance behind him at the door and he started to shake. A dozen grim-faced men stood there, nesters.

Wingo whirled then and plunged at the door, plowing into the nesters, and he almost made it through them to freedom before a man tripped him. Wingo fell and as though from a signal, every nester there rushed upon him, yelling, swinging boots and fists, and one or two, pistols.

In the short time it took Jess to walk out the door and to the sidewalk, Wingo was a sodden, blood-soaked wreck. A nester hauled him to his feet and he swayed there, blood dripping off him. His gun and badge were gone.

"Wingo," a nester said, "get your things and be gone from this town in half an hour or we'll hang you! We don't need Tybolt's law here. You can pass the word that no Tybolt man is welcome here in Wigley. Tybolt will find that out himself!"

Jess stared at these men, neighbors, in astonishment. A few minutes ago they had been quick to turn away from his trouble, but a little talk, the sight of him backing Wingo down, and they had gone wild! Still, they were men who respected law and order, and already the thing they had done, no matter how right they had been, was palling on them, scaring them. It would take a little while for them to adjust themselves to it. As it had him.

As Wingo went at a staggering run down

the street, many of the nesters shifted uneasily, glancing at their neighbors. A man cried, "Yonder's Tacko!"

Here was a different problem. Here was a deadly gunman feared by all, a killer who was willing—eager—to ply his trade. Unease ran like a sound through the nesters and in a moment it had become fear. They began to sidle away and in a minute's time, Jess Bond stood alone on the sidewalk.

Beyond and to one side of Tacko, Tybolt stepped out on the porch of the hotel and stood there rolling a cigar in his mouth. Tybolt wasn't a big man. He looked soft and flabby to Jess Bond, and the distance couldn't hide the unhealthy color of his face. But what he represented was important, and made him important; it made his followers stand at a respectable distance behind him now.

Jess saw Tacko speak to a man in a store's doorway, and that man struck out up the street at a trot toward Jess Bond. He stopped before Jess and he sweated with the spotlight upon him.

"Tacko says he's comin' after you, Bond," the man said. "He says you can run but it won't do you no good. He says step on out and meet him."

"Tell him I'm comin' out," Jess said and watched the man scoot back down the street.

JESS turned into Haversham's store and went to the gun rack. His hands sweated and shook. He was scared stiff and he admitted it. He had come for this and here it was. He was no gunman; he couldn't hit the barn with a pistol over ten feet away. He fondled the rifles here, he reckoned he rated that much to even up Tacko's skill and speed.

Suddenly anger came to him, not at Tacko but at his own neighbors. They had been mighty brave a while ago, jumping Wingo after Jess had backed him down. But they were gone now, when they could be of some help. He wanted to rush out and curse them

for fools and nitwits. All of them could hang Tacko and Tybolt or duck them in a tar barrel. It could be over that easy.

His anger cooled again. That wasn't the way of things, and he had come here to face this very thing. Those other men hadn't seen Tacko kill a man. Tacko wasn't after them—yet. It was Jess Bond's problem now.

He took a double-barreled shotgun from the rack and turned to find Haversham holding a box of shells. Jess slipped two into the chambers and two more in his pocket. He snapped the breech and turned for the door. Cocking the shotgun, he stepped out on the sidewalk to see Tacko fifty feet away standing in the street. Tacko held a six-shooter half lifted.

Jess was shaking and thought, *I'll need a cannon at this rate, one that'll shoot all over the street!* The thought struck him as funny and his laugh was a keening, rattling sound that raised the hackles on his own neck.

He saw Tacko jerk, stare, and snap up his gun. Tacko fired, but the burst of laughter had unnerved him, made him miss. He didn't get the chance to fire again. Jess fired both barrels of the shotgun, and the recoil set him hard against the store front. Powder smoke swirled out into the street and momentarily blotted out sight of the gunman there. But a vagrant breeze pulled the smoke away and Tacko was a forlorn shape in the dust.

Jess Bond broke the shotgun, slipped in the two extra shells and closed the breech again. He walked down the street with wooden strides, toward Tybolt, toward the hotel.

From the hotel porch they stared at him, eyes big and round. They stared at Tybolt too, who stood frozen there on the sidewalk, his cigar halfway to his mouth. The cattle king's face was white, but he had his front and he couldn't afford to run.

Jess stopped in front of Tybolt and stared at him, then he cocked the shotgun,

the sounds loud in the dead silence. Jess half lifted the gun, held at the ready.

"Tybolt," Jess said in a strained and shaky voice, "everybody knew that Tacko was your hired killer. I saw him murder a man in the middle valley. He had to kill me to shut me up, keep me from talking till I got somebody to listen. I just killed a man, and I didn't want to kill him. But it was me or him and it was your doing. I wanted to work my place but you wouldn't let me, Tybolt, so I'm prepared to kill you too." The effort he put into his words gave them a terrible intensity.

Tybolt started to tremble and his cigar fell from his fingers. "You got me wrong, Bond, I had no connection with Tacko."

"Don't stand there and lie like that!" Jess shouted. "Tybolt, don't you see that you're about to die?"

Tybolt put his back against the porch column and he seemed to need the support that it gave him. "I killed my bull last night, Tybolt, I shot him because I was scared and thought it was Tacko. You aim to pay me for that bull, you count me out a hundred dollars!" Jess was shaking again and his knuckles, as he gripped the gun stock, were white with the strain.

Tybolt cast a desperate glance around, but he saw no help, all he saw was the staring eyes, eyes that looked upon him as already dead. Tybolt's power went then, and

he leaned there against the post, a weak and shaking skeleton of a man. His breath rasped through loose lips, and when he tried to get the money from his wallet he almost couldn't do it.

Jess Bond stepped forward, snatched his hundred dollars and stepped back again. Jess spoke then, more calmly, "Maybe I ought to kill you, Tybolt, but I can't hardly bring myself to do it. But you get from here, and don't you ever set your foot in Wigley again or we'll hang you to the nearest tree. We aim to hold an election here and vote in an honest lawman like it's supposed to be done. You can tell your jackal sheriff that before he comes back."

Jess turned and walked down the street. In a moment he heard his name called and he saw Allie behind Haversham's. Jess angled toward her and increased his stride. She looked small and precious to him from here, and he well knew that she would look even better close up. She would hug him and cry a little, and tell him that his was true courage, and Jess Bond, manlike, would get a little puffed up with his own importance, and after awhile he would no longer tell her that he was half scared to death. In fact, so doggone scared that he still didn't have half his senses back, and he hoped it would be many a moon before he had to give a demonstration of true courage again. ● ● ●

The State That Elected Lincoln!

IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR NEVADA, Lincoln might never have become our Civil War president. And if it hadn't been for Lincoln, it's possible that Nevada would never have been admitted to the Union! It seems that Abe needed two more congressional votes in the early '60's—and obtained them by admitting Nevada, and utilizing hers. Actually, however, there weren't enough people in the area to entitle it to this privilege—and it's still sparsely populated. What's more, although the folks who lived there at the time had little interest in the war, they contributed considerably to the winning of the North, via the gold and the silver that they mined from the Comstock Lode.

Ritter

THE GRUBLINE KID

By ROBERT
L. TRIMNELL



"Don't come closer, Ring," Dobey rasped. "I mean to shoot you off your horse if you do."

When the Boyles took Dobey off the grubline and made him one of the family, they didn't know the kid was a scout for a crew of night-riding, cow-thieving gun-wolves!

DOBEY CRAWFORD looked down at the baked yellow crust of the mud flats he would have to cross. He sighted on the smoke at the ranchhouse, and picked his course. He said, "Okay, Ring. I got it."

Pyle Ring jerked his hat down over his swarthy, black-bearded face and said, "Git goin'. Comanche Joe will keep a eye out

for you tomorrow. Kane and me'll figure the herd." He jerked his thumb at the other two riders and they nodded in agreement.

Dobey checked the tie of the violin case behind his saddle. He mumbled, "These cows are goin' to be skinny."

"Then they'll run faster," Ring grunted. "Git movin'."

Dobey kned his horse down the trail toward the distant smoke.

A woman appeared in the ranchhouse yard as he rode up. A gray-haired woman with a basket of wet washing in her hands. She paused and called a greeting.

Dobey tipped his hat and grinned at her. "Ma'am, I—"

She cut him off. "Sorry, we aren't taking on any riders. We've let them all go but old Whitey, and Pedro." She set down the basket of washing and put her hands on ample hips. "But grubliners are always welcome. Go into the kitchen and Barbara will put the coffee on to hot up."

He said, "Thankee, Ma'am," and grinned. He beat at the yellow dust on his clothes. "Maybe I best shake out my clothes and wash up first."

"Tank is down by the bunkhouse. Come up through New Arroyo? Looks it."

"I come up through a yeller basin with some waterholes in it, Ma'am."

"That's New Arroyo." She shook her head. "Bad when the arroyo dries, real bad." But she didn't seem to be thinking about the arroyo. She was scanning him carefully. She noted the wide grin, the boyish face, the long trunk that made him tall in the saddle, taller than his legs could match.

Dobey thought he saw suspicion in her eyes. Well, they'd be suspicious of any rider this season. The range was full of tumbleweeds, with the sun drying jobs up as sure as it made standing brown hay of the grass. He figured it was just regular suspicion.

"Looks like a fiddle you're totin'," she said. She smiled. "The girls will sure like

that. Well. Must get these clothes out. I'm Miz Boyle."

"Dobey Crawford, from Texas, Ma'am," Dobey said, lifting his hat again. He saw she had work to do so he turned his yellow-dusted pony toward the bunkhouse. He rode at a slow walk, and as soon as he was turned from her, his smile vanished and weary creases came into his broad forehead. He glanced up at the loom of the Caps in the distance, where they'd pulled the last raid. Sort of a horseshoe brand, it was. Fellow name of Keller. Then beyond the Caps—couldn't remember that one. But all of them were alike. All of them close to the border, so with a hard night's drive you were in Mexico by morning.

Feeling weary and disgusted, he made a cigarette and smoked it sitting his horse beside the water tank, before even wetting his mouth with the cool, fresh water.

AFTER supper he sat on a pepper-tree stump in front of the veranda, and fiddled for the people of Jim Boyle's Long Bar. Jim Boyle sat in a chair tilted back against the wall, his long legs stretched out before him. He was scowling. Miz Boyle smiled and darned socks. The two girls sat on the edge of the porch. Lucy, who was only sixteen, ate Dobey up with her round blue eyes. Barbara, the redhead, was more restrained. Old Whitey and Pedro squatted against the wall of the house, tried to mirror the boss's scowl, but failed. Their feet kept tapping out the beat.

Dobey grinned over the fiddle tucked under his chin, and played them *Jumpin' Frog* and *Oh Susannah!* He played *Silver Threads Among the Gold* very soft and weepy, and Barbara blushed and Miz Boyle sighed.

"Seems like there ought to be more fiddlers in times like this," she said, when he was done.

Dobey grinned, "There isn't much work in a fiddler, Ma'am, and sometimes they follow the lazy path and it don't always run

straight. By rights they ought to lock up the fiddlers when dry weather comes."

She laughed. "Oh, you're joshing, Dobey!"

But Jim Boyle and his two men looked narrowly at Dobey. They were seeing a fiddlefoot in worn clothes who was vaguely from Texas. Long Bar was too close to the border to be overtrusting with such strangers.

Dobey grinned at them. He scratched under his hat with the point of the fiddle bow. He said, "Maybe Miss Barb'ra's got a tune in mind?"

"*Estrella Linda?*" she said.

He nodded and whacked the bow across the strings and glanced at Pedro. The mahogany-faced old Mexican smiled with pleasure. The song must be a favorite of his, Dobey thought. Nice girl, Barbara, picking it for him. He played on until the moon came up and the birds in the cottonwood tree quit answering his music.

After Miz Boyle and the girls had gone off to bed, they still sat there. Jim Boyle, Whitey Grains, the foreman and last permanent hand, Pedro, the horse wrangler, and Dobey.

"You hail from Texas?" Jim Boyle asked, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Uh-huh," Dobey agreed.

"Dry there too?"

"Dunno. Used to be. I've been off—" He made a vague motion with his hand. "Around."

"Ridin' jobs thin?"

"Kind of," Dobey answered.

Jim Boyle said, "A season like this, there's plenty of fellows who'd throw a long loop and not care what brands they crossed."

"Seems reasonable." He put the fiddle carefully in its case and made a cigarette for himself. He sat on the pepper stump, leaning forward with elbows on knees. "Had any trouble around Brados?"

"Sam Keller has. He's off our drain—grazing the slopes of the Caps this year.

But it's only forty, fifty mile to his headquarters. Well, we still hold the grubline open. Figure there's not many who'd rustle off a brand that's offered them hospitality. The beef Ma fries may be stringy now, but there's plenty of it."

"We sure ate high off the hog tonight," Dobey agreed. "And the roastin' ears was awful good, considerin' the dry. Awful good." He sighed. He stood and took the fiddle under his arm, preparing to go off to the bunkhouse. "What's for work tomorrow?"

Boyle said, "You and Whitey can ride fence off to New Arroyo. When I heard Miz Boyle tell how you was all yellow dust, like you'd come up that way, I figgered it must be near dry. See, New Arroyo holds 'em from back off that government graze. They stick around the water holes there. But if it's dusty-dry we better tighten up the drift fence down that way."

Dobey Crawford nodded. "Whitey, you kick me good in the mornin'. I'm a lazy critter to root out of a bunk." He grinned and began to drift off, murmuring, "Evenin', gents."

He was such a calm and peaceable fellow, they thought. If it weren't dry season, you wouldn't think twice about Dobey Crawford.

But it was dry, and that was why Whitey Grains paused a moment by Dobey Crawford's bunk that evening, before turning in. Dobey was asleep and his knees were jerking as he ran through a nightmare. His wide mouth was drawn down and quivering.

Kind of troubled, for an easy-going fiddle player, Whitey thought.

THEY found the first carcass about mid-morning. It was a late-born bull calf, unmarked by the spring roundup. Dobey slid down off his horse, drawing his knife. Whitey said, "Hell, I'll skin it out." But Dobey was already cutting down the backbone. They hung the hide over the fence and rode on. Whitey noticed a tightness

about the drifter's usually smiling lips.

"Reckon it don't bother you so much as us," Whitey said.

There was a rough edge in Dobey's voice when he replied. "I've done it to my own. I mean, folks I worked for."

"It makes you feel bad inside when they die of dry," Whitey said. "Nothin' you can do about it. Ain't nothin' you can fight. Jist let it burn you inside." He fingered at his shirt pocket and caught the tobacco tag. "Smokin's?"

"Let me put up the smokin's. I got a pound of fine-cut in my warbag, and a dollar to buy more." He jerked the tag on his own sack and tossed it to the foreman. He rode on, glum. There didn't look to be much fiddling in him, not this day.

They had a cold bait of lunch and water from the canteens. The remaining water-holes were liquid mud. New Arroyo bucked up against the ridge out of the Brado Drain and only the spring floods got through. The rest made a wet sinkhole, which still held a lot of grass, compared to the rest of the slope. So Dobey could see it was bad when the arroyo was crusting over.

After their lunch they parted. Whitey rode off to a drift fence across the hills. Dobey followed the fence they had been riding. At the end he was to cut back toward headquarters. But after Whitey was gone, he dismounted in the meager shade of a dying cottonwood on the edge of the arroyo. There he squatted against the tree bole, made himself a cigarette, and waited.

He'd been there a half-hour when a pony clopped up the arroyo. The rider was Comanche Joe, drooping sleepily over the saddle. But the sleepiness meant that he was sure he was unobserved. He had a face the color of mesquite wood, a thin, root-tough body.

When Joe came close, Dobey waved him off his horse. He offered tobacco when Joe had dismounted and also squatted in the shade of the cottonwood. Comanche Joe twisted a cigarette with slender, nerveless

fingers. He lit it and looked to Dobey to speak.

"Two hands besides the boss man, and then his womenfolks," Dobey said. "It ought to be pretty easy."

Comanche Joe nodded. "Ring, he say, tomorrow night we got no moon. Diablo, moon is no good in this dusty country. Ring he is right."

"Yeah, Ring is right. Ring's always right. What's Kane say?"

"Kane, he say what Ring say. Ring say tomorrow night."

Dobey nodded. "I can hold 'em at the house with my fiddle until they go to bed. Then in the morning I'll say I'm moving on. I'll meet up with you fellers around noon out there."

He pointed out the gap in the ridge.

"No. Ring say, you come at ten, eleven o'clock tomorrow night. *Media noche*, you come sooner. Ring say, thees cows come early here to drink. We don't let them drink. We drive. Out there—" He pointed through the gap—"Much water. They smell much water."

"They'll stampede after the water, that what he wants? Kill off half so he can make thirty miles by sunup?"

The Indian shrugged. "What's he care? Ring don't care."

Dobey swore at Pyle Ring.

"What's matter?"

"Nothing. Just, the hell with Ring. That lousy murderer. Ever since he shot that poor Mex in the Gila—shot him before the Mex could draw. Ever since then."

"No. Always. You always got something in you, it don't go like Ring want. I savvy. Always something."

Dobey swore and climbed into the saddle, jerking his hat down to keep out the sun's blast.

Comanche Joe said, "I remember. Is very dry when you come with us, first time. Like this."

"Go to blazes," Dobey swore, and rough-reined his pony away along the fence.

THAT night he lay on his bunk plucking the fiddle strings as though it were a guitar, the bow lying in the case. It was dark; nobody else had come in so he lay there alone. Probably they expected him to come around to the veranda. He wasn't going. He lay there and thought of the time he met Pyle Ring, Kane, and Comanche Joe.

It had been dry, like it was dry now in the Brados Basin. Sand piled up against old man Holland's fences, and cows piled up against them. The sand drifted up over the bodies, so you had to kick sand away before you could skin them out.

Even though they were Holland's cows, it had burnt him deep inside. Then old man Holland had gotten crabby. They'd bickered for a while, then blown up and Holland had fired him. It was strange how sympathy could turn to hate. Quick temper and blistering drought didn't match up well. Later, he wondered if Holland had worked up the fight as an excuse to fire him, because he didn't want to admit he couldn't afford to keep him on.

Broke, he'd met Pyle Ring's gang in a saloon. They weren't broke. They were well fed and wore new clothes, and ordered their whiskey by the bottle. He had plenty of their whiskey. It didn't make him happy, as liquor usually did. It scratched at the festering wounds inside, and he didn't feel shocked when he learned what their business was. Ring had led carefully up to it, and had just as shrewdly pointed out that Dobey was the fellow who'd know how to move cows off of Holland's place, since he knew the lay of the land so well.

They sold the cows in Mexico and had a big blow out. Easy money, then, and easy life. That was a year ago. When Ring killed the Mex, that was what started him thinking this way. This getting a sour taste every time he looked at somebody else's brand with his eyebrow cocked and fast routes to Mexico in mind.

Dobey heard someone enter the bunk-

house. He paid little attention until he became aware of a silent shadow between him and the window. He turned and saw a slender, womanly shape.

"Dobey, aren't you going to come and fiddle tonight?"

"I don't reckon, Miss Barb'ra," he said, sitting up. He saw her sit down on the facing bunk. "I kind of, you see—whopped my left hand with the, uh, staplin' hammer today. Better rest it a piece."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. She sounded disappointed. "Well, I thought anyway you could come out there and talk a little. Why, we don't know the first thing about you—I'm sure you'd have some interesting stories!"

"No different than many, Miss Barb'ra." But he flushed, in spite of himself. No different than many. But no stories he was proud to tell her.

"Well, I thought if we knew a little about you—see, Pop is talking it that if we had some rain he'd see his way clear to take on a hand or two. That would take some work off Pedro and Whitey. You see?"

He saw. He saw that if Jim Boyle had said that, she'd put the words in his mouth. He blushed and was glad it was so dark.

"Maybe I wouldn't hanker to settle down anyhow, Miss Barb'ra." His voice became gruffer. "Maybe I'm just a tumbleweed, like. I just can't stop rollin'. See?"

"I see," she said sharply, and rose. "Well, we'll see you at breakfast, Mr. Crawford!" She stroke rapidly out, and when she was in the yard he heard the clatter of her heels as she ran back to the house.

He went and stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse, for a time listening to the murmur of voices on the veranda. He stood there pounding his knuckles into his palm. At last he turned and went to bed.

NEXT morning, after breakfast, Pedro and Whitey drove some of the horses out to a bench on the east slope where there

looked to be a bit of graze. Jim Boyle put on his best suit and prepared to go to town. He was taking Barbara along to help cajole some groceries out of the local storekeepers. But before he left, Boyle said, "Crawford, you want to give Ma and Lucy a hand with the garden today?"

Then he left.

Dobey's jaw fell down toward his flapjacks. At first, anger blazed in him; a cow-hand digging in a garden! Then he looked at Miz Boyle and Lucy. He realized it was a job designed to force him to ride on. They were slapping him in the face with the garden job.

Miz Boyle said, "I guess Lucy and me could manage the garden if you don't want. Just some weeding to do, Dobey."

He said, "Ma'am, the garden probably needs a man's back pushin' a spade for a change. I don't mind at all. Heck, I can steal vegetables while I work!" He managed to grin, and managed to eat the rest of his wheatcakes. He went out in the garden and saw it was time to run some water in the rows again. The soil was gray, powder dry. He tapped the tank overflow and steered the water from row to row with the wooden irrigation spade. He kicked off his boots and worked barefoot.

He smouldered. Trying to drive him off by giving him woman's work! Or, clay-foot's work, if you wanted. He fumed all morning under the hot sun, ate the two best tomatoes in the garden for revenge, sweated, kept glancing at the house. Miz Boyle and Lucy were watching him. But not laughing.

He wondered, *maybe this is a test to see if I'll stay come hell or high water. They're pushing me, to see if I've got any tricks up my sleeve. Well, it's the first push. Tomorrow, maybe, they figure to try something else. But there won't be any tomorrow.*

Toward eleven o'clock, Miz Boyle waved a dish towel at him. He went in to the kitchen and found they had hot pie and cof-

fee waiting. That changed what he had to say about gardening. He sat down.

"You know," he said, "I don't mind so much workin' in a garden. Though, those flowers you got around the edge—I feel kind of funny with flowers all around me."

"I'll take care of the flowers," Lucy said, eyeing him over the rim of her cup.

"No, Miss Lucy, I'll hoe 'em. But it makes me feel like I'm wearin' a lace skirt, workin' with flowers around me."

He got a smile out of the two of them at last.

He was muddy to the knees when Barbara and her father came back from town. He waved at them with the tender young carrot he'd been chewing. Startled, they waved back at him. He worked on until the pan was banged for supper. Then he went to the tub and washed up and put on his clean shirt.

Supper was quiet. They didn't press him any about the day's work. But his presence put a damper on the conversation, and supper went mostly in silence. They didn't sit around the table long afterwards, either.

He wandered out to the bunkhouse and sat in the growing dark. He wondered if he'd have the nerve to play fiddle until bedtime, then ride off and steal their cattle. He wasn't sure. He was afraid they'd see it in him. He knew they were plenty suspicious.

Then, Barbara came.

She said, "Dobey, I thought—there's a couple of squeaky strings on the violin, aren't there? I mean—I got a new set. Cat gut. They were just sitting around Wilson's store anyhow, he says there's not many folks around here that's much for music." She held out the four circles of gut.

Blushing, he stammered, "Much obliged, Miss Barb'ra—much 'bliged!"

She left him hurriedly, as he mumbled something about stringing the violin before he went out to the veranda. But he didn't string the violin.

He sat with his jaw cupped in his hands.

He said aloud, "Aw, why did she have to do that?" He looked at the four rings of gut. This was as bad as Lucy and Miz Boyle making him the hot pie and coffee this morning. Only this was worse, because he was getting so he blushed easy around Barbara. He was always catching direct looks into her eyes, which neither of them had intended.

Now there wasn't a chance in the world of his fiddling for them while Ring and the others rounded up their cows. He couldn't face Boyle or any of his people. Not now. Here they were almost droughted out and they gave him pie and violin strings. And all they knew was, he was a kid from Texas with no job.

Quickly, he put the new strings in the violin case, and picked up his warbag and his rifle. When it was dark enough he went outside and got his saddle off the rail, shouldered it and ran out to catch his horse.

He saddled and put shells in the firing chamber of his rifle and sixgun, and mounted and rode off, fast, hard.

HE BENT low in the saddle and rode at a dead gallop toward New Arroyo. There was a bit of wind now. He jerked his bandanna up over his nose to keep out the dust. It would be worse on this trail ahead, with a couple hundred cows kicking it up. And if they stampeded, as Ring meant to do, a man could choke to death.

They were already moving the cattle. There was a blacker darkness against the night that he knew was dust from under the hoofs of a hundred or so head, and then he heard the bawling. Driving the cows away from their habitual water. Spook 'em up so after they're through the ridge cut they'll follow the water smell, and after an hour, maybe, they'll break for it. It's the calves that'll get trampled and left behind, and lost.

It was an awful thing to do to folks in a dry year.

Ring and Kane were shouting now, and for a moment he saw Ring's bulk silhou-

etted up above his horse. Then Kane, skinny, drooping over the saddle horn, and off to the right there, the gliding shadow of Comanche Joe. They were working quiet but for a few calls to one another.

He came up behind the herd, and saw Ring point over at the side where Comanche Joe was. Dobey took his rifle from the boot. He muttered, "Ring, you don't need these cows as bad as the folks here does. Let's call it a day and go someplace else." He fired a shot above the rumbling herd.

A steer not far from him broke into a crazy run and horned another; the fringe of the herd shattered. Dobey fired again and again, and saw the rippling edge, tossing nervously, break. A couple of steers headed off toward Comanche Joe, and the rest of the tail followed. But another bunch cut dead for the center of the herd, and Dobey saw the whole center go shooting off like an arrow, leaving the others behind. Then it was just a roiling, fleeing mass, and he could no longer distinguish movements. He fired a final blast from his rifle, and they ran in every direction.

He halted his horse, reloaded his rifle, and waited for Ring.

Ring came in first, waving his arms in rage. Shouting and swearing. "By God, you fool, what in hell you do that for? Why ain't you back there fiddlin' for 'em to give us a couple more hours' sure lead?"

"Don't come no closer, Ring," Dobey rasped. "I mean to shoot you off your horse, if you do. I'm tellin' you to ride out through that ridge cut and don't come back."

Comanche Joe and Kane were coming up, bewildered. At least Kane was confused, scratching his long, skinny jaw. Joe you couldn't tell about so easily.

"All of yuh, ride. You aren't goin' to do this to these folks," Dobey growled, swinging his rifle over the three of them.

Ring's head was down, his eyes narrowed. "Joe, Kane. Shoot him. Both at once. Now!"

Kane wheeled his gun suddenly, and a red flower bloomed in front of him and the guncrash rocked clear to Dobey and smashed his left arm and knocked it loose from the rifle and left it dangling. The pain of broken bones gnashing together screamed up his arm and into his face. His horse shied and he knew he couldn't handle his rifle now. He dropped it and snatched his sixgun and slid off his horse to the ground.

He fell in a muddy pool. Gravel slammed his face as a bullet struck before him. Two of them were shooting—nothing from Comanche Joe. Joe must be counting himself out, Dobey thought. But ahead he saw a rod of flame leave a gun, grow toward him and clap his head like thunder blasting out of storm clouds. Dazed, he still had his gun up, and when Ring showed, he fired.

He saw the hat fly off and then the big man looming against the sky and rushing at him, screaming with rage. He pegged in two solid shots. He saw them shake Ring, and drive him back but he didn't stop. Dobey slapped in another and Ring spun all the way around and fell into what looked like a dead mesquite, and hung there without moving.

There were only a couple more shells in the gun. Dobey whacked one off in the general direction of Kane. There was a scream. "Dobey, lay off—I'm ridin'—I ain't going to trouble you none, not me, I'm ridin'!"

Waves of sound still hammered Dobey's ears. His head was spinning in and out of a tarry pool. But he still heard a horse start up and clatter over dry land toward the cut, and fade into the distance. Then another clatter, as Comanche Joe followed.

Then it all went black.

DOBEY came to looking into a pair of eye glasses. A man was bending over him, and somehow he knew that the man was a doctor.

"Where am I?" he mumbled.

"My office. Spater Crossings. Jim Boyle brought you in."

The doctor didn't say any more, or else Dobey couldn't remember if he did. Later he found his left arm was in a cast, and there was a bandage around his head. The doctor's wife helped take care of him mostly. Neither she nor the doctor was overfriendly.

Dobey decided to ride on the third day, even with his arm in the cast.

They'd brought all his stuff. He asked the doctor if he would accept the rifle and sixgun in exchange for the doctoring.

"Reckon so," the doctor said. "Good rifle. But how about the fiddle? I'd rather have that."

Dobey shook his head. "No, can't give you the fiddle. What did Jim Boyle tell you, Doc?"

"Told me he followed you out to New Arroyo that night. Said how it looked when he found you laying there. Said he wasn't going to sic no law onto you. You hadn't stolen any cows, and it was clear you'd shot that man in self-defense."

"I see." He had the fiddle case under his arm. He looked down at it and said, "My pa's fiddle."

"Oh. That's why you didn't want to trade it in for doctoring?"

"No, that's not it." He handed it to the doctor. "Give it to Miss Barb'ra, will you? Reckon I'll be too busy to play much fiddle for a while."

He hurried out and saddled his horse. The doctor came out after him and saw him mount and head the pony east, away from the Boyle place. "Might be coming back?" the doctor called.

"Might be. I hope so," he answered. It was not much of an answer. But it was all he could give. Ahead of him was a long stretch of dry grublines, and maybe, when rain came, some paying work. A lot of it. Even if he had to dig in people's gardens. Which wasn't so bad when you came down to it.

He grinned and whistled softly as he rode away.

HOT LEAD HARVEST



Early tried to shift farther into the bushes. Wyatt saw the move and jumped. . . .

By
MARVIN DeVRIES

WYATT HORN was holding the sold horses in a natural trap pasture near the house. There were twenty-one of them. He had broken them all and now he was ready to make the long trip to Frego Junction to deliver them to the buyer. He didn't expect any trouble, but Moler, who owned the ranch and the

horses, had a lot of last minute instructions and warnings to give.

"Make everlastin' sure you don't get into quicksand in the Pearly. An' watch that ornery paint. He's a bunch quitter if I ever seen one. He'll leave you short if he gets half a chance. An' watch that what's-his-name—that Buzz Early feller. He might get it into his head to grab a couple of these bronses and light out. Watch him close. Watch everything."

Wyatt Horn nodded to all of this. He felt a kind of vague compassion for Moler, who had hurt his spine in a fall from a horse several years ago and couldn't ride. The accident, and especially the tedium of being earthbound, had made him querulous and fretful about small matters. Wyatt, who had worked here on the Bar M for nearly two years, usually indulged him good-naturedly. "I'll watch it all," he promised.

"Now here's a moneybelt," Moler went on. "When Dayvault pays you, you give this Buzz Early bird the ten dollars I promised him 'an' put the rest of it in here an' fetch it home."

"Sure I will," Wyatt said, patiently.

At this point Mrs. Moler put her head out the kitchen door to tell her husband to make sure the belt was empty.

"I did, ten times, Millie," Moler called back. "It's empty all right." He gave Wyatt a rueful look, although he was a humorless man, and Wyatt grinned. Moler scratched his head to pull his mind back to business. "I'm sure you won't have any trouble outside of what I mentioned. When you get back to Pomeroy on the way home, you stop at the post office an' I'll have a letter there for you telling you whether I want you to deposit the cash in the bank or not. We haven't exactly made up our mind. The missus thinks we ought to put it in the bank, but I'm not so sure. Sometimes, I misdoubt that bank. Anyway, there'll be a letter waiting for you in the post office at Pomeroy."

Wyatt pulled up his shirt and strapped

on the belt, gave Moler a wave of his hand, and headed for the trap pasture where Buzz Early was opening a section of the brush fence to let the herd out. He was a total stranger to Wyatt. He had arrived at the Bar M the previous night, and had had a free meal. He was heading north, according to his tell, and Moler had offered him the job of helping Wyatt get the horse herd to Frego Junction. Watching him pull brush, Wyatt got the impression that he didn't take to work, and, as the day wore on, he realized the impression did Early no injustice. He wouldn't put his hand to anything without being prodded into it, and he had no knack with horses. "You don't exactly take to horses, do you?" was the way Wyatt put it.

Early shook his head and said he took more naturally to cows. "No percentage in horses. I wouldn't work on a horse ranch. It don't pay. You get queer in no time. Hell, it stands to reason a man ain't built to get his spine shoved up into his skull every day in the week. It builds up pressure and he goes nuts. Did you bust all these bronses?"

"Every last solitary one of them," Wyatt stated. "And I will say they're all fit to ride."

"How long you been working for that old goat?"

"About two years."

"He looks chinchy to me."

"Oh, I don't know. I get paid."

"How much?"

Wyatt took a deep breath, held it a moment, then let it go. "Thirty a month."

Buzz Early shook his head. "I don't see the percentage. I was going to hit him for a steady job, but the minute I set eyes on him I knew he wasn't my dish."

"I thought you didn't take to horses."

"Well, a guy gets pressed. Normally, I wouldn't work for his kind, always belly-achin' an' botherin' a guy."

"Oh, I don't know," Wyatt said mildly. "I never think much about him one way or

the other, and we get along. I just go ahead in my own way of doing things. In a way of speaking, that makes a man his own boss, and we get along."

FOR a while, Early had no more questions to ask, and Wyatt got to thinking what a small part the Molers really played in his affairs. He had a feeling that the missus was a little fond of him, but she didn't overdo it, and Moler himself was always inclined to be critical, even if he could find nothing to criticize. It was a habit of mind brought on by his ailment,

"I can believe that. Twenty-one times thirty-seven fifty. How much is that?"

"I don't know. About eight hundred dollars, I reckon."

Early tried to work it out with a stick in the sand, but he got involved in difficulties, and Wyatt had to come to his aid. They finally arrived at a sum of \$787.00. Somehow, the extra fifty cents got lost, but neither of them noticed the mistake. "Seven hundred and eighty seven dollars," Early mumbled. "That's a nice sum of money."

"Enough to keep Moler and his missus going for some time."

His boss trusted him to bring the money back home safely. So naturally Wyatt Horn would kill any man who tried to take it from him. But what if the robber's name was Wyatt Horn?

perhaps a kind of fear of disaster that came closer to him because he didn't have his full strength to meet it.

Sometimes he criticized Wyatt's way of breaking broncs, but Wyatt still did it his own way, and the fact that Dayvault had bought this bunch proved he was doing a good job. He was gentler with animals than Moler, and believed a hard-broken horse was never quite as good as it might have been. He believed, too, that, in all things, a man must follow his own bent to do them best, and this was something he didn't intend to let go. *If I get these broncs to Frego Junction and the loaded money belt back to him, he thought, I've done my job.*

"How much is he getting for these nags?" Early broke out again later, when they were finishing their evening meal.

"Thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents a piece."

"That's a good price."

"They're good animals."

Early grinned lop-sidedly. "What's the extra fifty cents for?"

"Search me. Maybe it's just the end of a long hard dicker."

"Yeah, if they get it."

Wyatt gave him a cool look. "Why wouldn't they?"

Buzz Early shrugged. "You never know. You might have some trouble gettin' it back there."

"I don't think so. Nobody knows about it, except you." He gave Early another steady look. "Does that make trouble?"

Early shrugged again. "I wouldn't think of it. Maybe we could split it between us when we get to Frego Junction." He laughed briefly to take the curse off what he was saying.

Wyatt, however, wasn't sure the curse was off. The idea that Buzz Early might make an attempt to rob him nested in the back of his mind the rest of the trip. Studying him by day, and talking to him by the fire, he came to the conclusion that he might try it, if he could scare up the nerve. That was the one thing he was short on. One evening, to make it shorter still, Wyatt pulled out his gun and put a hole through the center of a white-petaled daisy that waved in the evening breeze, and didn't disturb a petal.

"Wow!" Buzz breathed. He walked over and picked the flower before he would believe his eyes. "That's pretty good."

"Good enough to keep this moneybelt around my belly when it's full."

"That sounds reasonable," Buzz agreed, and thoughtfully picked at the blades of grass between his legs.

One moonlit night, Early took a walk along a ravine and spotted a prowling animal. He came back to borrow Wyatt's gun, claiming his own was out of whack. Suspicion flashed through Wyatt's brain, but he let him take it, figuring Early couldn't rustle the band of horses, and wouldn't know what to do with it if he tried. In the end, Early returned the gun without firing a shot.

"The critter ran off," he stated.

WHEN they reached Frego Junction, they drove the horses into Dayvault's corral, and the buyer settled with them on the spot. He did his figuring on the gate post, and must have made the same trivial mistake Wyatt and Buzz Early had made in the sand, because he came out with the same fifty-cent error, giving Wyatt a total of seven hundred and eighty-seven dollars. Out of that, Wyatt paid Early ten dollars and put the rest in the moneybelt.

The buyer liked his buy, and made Wyatt a proposition. "Get a place of your own, first of all. It ought to be somewhere near here so we could work together. I would put everything I buy in your hands so you could bring 'em up to match this Bar M stuff. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know. I'd like it, but I don't know if I could make a go of it."

"You could figure on about a hundred and fifty dollars a month from me."

Wyatt's eyes bulged. Dayvault was an important man in this business. His word was dependable, and what he was saying was like a dream coming true. "It sounds good, but I don't know if I could get a place."

"I know a place near Santa Rosa that's losing out. I think it would suit you. It's the Triangle L. A girl by the name of Nora Leland runs it."

Wyatt's eyes widened again. "I know that place. I used to work there before I went to Moler." His enthusiasm began to fade. "But I don't reckon I could buy into a place like that."

"It won't take as much as you think," Dayvault went on. "The banker in Pomeroy has a mortgage on it for five hundred dollars. I happen to know the bank there is in difficulties. Show them five hundred dollars, and the property's yours."

Gradually, Wyatt got his feet back on the ground. "I reckon I might as well say no right now," he stated. "It doesn't sound like much, but it's more than I can handle."

Dayvault looked disappointed. "Well, if you find a way, let me know. I'll hold it open a while."

Wyatt used what daylight was left to put some miles behind him. Toward evening he reached a small stream and camped among the willows, but he couldn't get to sleep. Dayvault's proposal clattered around in his head like a loose board in a gale. To his way of thinking, it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but he could find no way of taking advantage of it.

It was a difficult conclusion to come to, because the place had a special meaning for him. Discounting his own natural knack, he believed that Mr. Leland, Nora's father, had taught him all he knew about horses, and when he went to work for Moler, the place had become a kind of dream lode-stone, because it was the place where Nora lived. They had written to each other regularly. He knew her father had died and that she was running the place now. But it surprised him to hear from Dayvault that the place was for sale at a price that could mean nothing less than complete ruin.

He closed his eyes and tried to force himself to sleep, but it wouldn't work. A small

scuffing sound close by caught his attention and he slanted his eyes in the direction he thought it came from. But before he could see anything a voice came at him out of the dark. "Don't move, or I shoot."

Wyatt froze. He recognized the voice. It was Buzz Early's. He tried to disguise it, but it was a poor attempt. Wyatt finally spoke up and told him not to strain himself. "You sound like a strangled pup, Buzz. What're you tryin' to do?"

"You know what I'm after," Early stated in his natural voice. "Don't mess around or I'll kill you."

"I thought your gun was out of whack."

"It ain't."

"Remember the daisy, Buzz," Wyatt remarked. "The poor little daisy?"

"Remember when I borrowed your gun?" Early crowed right back. "I pulled all the lead. That's what I borrowed it for. You're loaded with blanks." In spite of this advantage, his voice quivered with strain. His nerves were jumping.

Wyatt could see him now, in the deep shadow of the willows. He was within jumping distance, a long jump. "Oh, that," Wyatt said, after a short pause. "I noticed that before we got to Frego Junction."

"The hell you did!" Early exploded, his voice sloping up to a higher pitch, a touch of sudden panic in it.

"You want to give it a try?"

Early was frightened. The sudden silence proved it. He tried to shift further into the bushes. Wyatt saw the move and jumped. Early's gun roared, and fire singed Wyatt's ribs, but it didn't stop him. His shoulder slammed into Early's stomach and brought him down. A jet of fire leaped up through the tangled twigs, but it swept past Wyatt and died to nothing.

Wyatt stamped as if he were stamping out fire. Early's fingers crunched and a shrill yelp leaped off his lips. Wyatt kicked at the gun and heard it slap away through the undergrowth. Early tried to roll, but Wyatt jumped him again, landing with his

knees on Early's back. Early's breath gushed out, and a strangled groan rumbled in his throat. Wyatt jerked him up and held him there like a scarecrow, then struck him in the jaw and let him go. Early stumbled back until he went over the drop-off into the creek. Splash hit Wyatt's legs. He stepped forward and looked down.

Early was still moving. He was moving on all fours to the far side of the creek. Wyatt saw him crawl up the bank and disappear into the brush. A little later, he heard Early's horse pounding away in the direction of Frego Junction, and Early was probably aboard.

Wyatt broke his gun, took a wry look at the blank cartridges in chamber, snapped them out, and reloaded. Then he picked up his gear, caught up his hobbled horse, and started to travel.

NORA LELAND was twenty years old.

She had been a little past eighteen when her father died, less than that when Wyatt Horn worked on the place and paid her his shy gentle attentions, telling her in so many ways that his heart belonged to her, but never speaking the words. Sometimes, she wondered if he still felt the same way, or whether he had grown away from her.

His letters were so stilted and restrained, she never could tell with certainty whether they meant as much as she wished they did. But he did write regularly, usually on lined notebook paper, and she got what comfort she could from that. She had kept the whole accumulation, and, sometimes, in the evening, she read them through one by one, trying to see what was in his heart.

He wrote about general things, where he was working, what his wages were, sometimes a little of what his hopes and dreams were, a place of his own, a far dream this, he called it, because a man with skimpy wages had to look far to see anything like that at all. Sometimes, it almost seemed as if she could see something of herself in

those dreams, but that was a far look, too. She leaned against the corral gate and let her breath go in a long sigh.

Abe Forry was clattering around inside the bunkhouse, making angry sounds, and when he finally came out, loaded with his personal belongings, she turned to face him.

"Rider comin' this way," he stated, gruffly, but he didn't say from which direction, and she didn't try to find out. Forry was a rough grizzled man and, along with his warbag, carried a chip on his shoulder. "Well, I'm leavin'," he stated, clamping his jaw shut behind the words.

Nora nodded. "I'm sorry it had to turn out this way, Abe," she told him.

"An' I'm takin' every last nag on the place for my back pay—" he pounded his hollow-sounding chest— "I'll raise what I can on 'em in Santa Rosa. You'll owe me the rest. I mean to git it all."

"Of course. Thanks, Abe, for staying so long after things started going to pieces."

"I know you think it's my fault, but it ain't," Forty stated. "Dayvault don't know a good horse when he sees one, that's all there's to it. I broke 'em right. I know my business. I don't go along with his crazy notions. Break 'em hard and break 'em right, no use foolin' around like he says. I think he's in cahoots with the bank in Pomeroy to grab this place. I heard some talk like that from him when he was here."

"I know," Nora said. "You told me. You go ahead, Abe. Your wages come first."

Forry climbed his horse. "If I git more'n my wages I'll send you the balance."

He rode away, and Nora saw the last of him as he vanished over the crest of the hill toward Santa Rosa, herding the last Triangle L broncs ahead of him. The place was stripped, and she felt spent, as if all her strength and courage had gone over the hill with those sorry broncs no one wanted. She sagged down on the porch step, and leaned her head against the post. Her eyes blurred.

She had entirely forgotten the rider Abe Forry had mentioned until he rode into the yard. Then she sprang up and rushed to meet him, dabbing at the tears on her cheeks. "Wyatt—Wyatt," she breathed.

Her voice was a soft wail that couldn't have reached him, but his arms opened up and she went into them. He leaned his head on her shoulder, and his prickly cheek brushed against her neck. All his shyness poured out of him and he drew her close until their bodies melted together.

The welcome he got stunned him. Even in his wildest dreams he couldn't have imagined it, and the reality of her body pressed against his stilled his breath with its power. Her eagerness set up a hot flood that almost engulfed him. Proud and strong, it matched his own, as if their blood all at once came coursing violently together. At last, with a gentle caress, he lifted her off her feet and carried her into the house. "I knew this had to happen to us sometime," he told her. "I've been hoping for it so long."

"I couldn't tell from your letters," she accused him, gently.

"God's sake, letters. I couldn't write the things I felt. I tried a million times. And all the way over here, I've been trying to figure out how a man starts talk like that without scaring everybody to death. And, in the end, all I had to do was open up my arms."

"That's all. I would have walked into them through fire."

"I never knew a girl felt that way so much."

"Now you know." She poured him some hot coffee. "Where do you come from?"

"From Frego Junction. I fetched some horses up to Dayvault."

"Oh." Her face clouded a little. "He wouldn't buy ours."

"So I heard. What's the trouble, anyway?"

She told him the whole story. "Dayvault took our horses a few times after dad died.

but I could see he didn't like to. No one else would. This last time Dayvault wouldn't either."

"Abe Forry's no good with horses. I always knew that. Why'd you keep him around?"

"I owed him wages all the time so I had to keep him. But he's gone now, with the last of the horses."

Wyatt got up from the table, pushing himself up with his hands. His sore rib, which hadn't bothered him at all since the fight with Buzz Early, suddenly complained, and he sagged down again, waiting for the pain to pass. It was a hard shocking attack. Sweat broke out on his forehead. His vision blurred. Nora ran to him, accidentally touching his sore side. Another jolt of pain shot through him and threw him off his chair. "It's my rib," he told her when he caught his breath. "It seems to poke me. I guess you'll have to see what you can do. I got it last night. I—"

A third attack struck him before he finished what he wanted to say. Objects in the room lost their shape. The light seemed to fade. Then solid darkness swooped down on him and brought relief.

WHEN he came out of it, his chest was bandaged from top to bottom with strips of sheeting. Nora had got him into bed. His clothes hung on pegs on the wall. The bulging moneybelt lay on a small table in the corner.

"Why didn't you say something?" Nora complained.

"It didn't bother me at all until after I got here."

"How'd it happen?"

"All about that." He nodded at the moneybelt. "Somebody tried to grab it. I put up a fight and got hit."

She wondered if she ought to get a doctor, but he shook his head. "I can't stay that long. Moler'll have a fit."

"He's lucky to get it back at all. S'pose you had been robbed."

"A better hand than he was would have to try it."

"That sounds like bragging."

"It is."

Nora smiled and walked to the door. "You rest for a while. I'll go get dinner started."

After she had gone, he thought back to the fight with Buzz Early. *I took a big chance*, he thought, *and if he'd been a little luckier than he was, Moler's money would be gone now*. Then he thought about Dayvault's offer, and it occurred to him that a man who was built that way could put the two events together and make something of it to his own advantage. A man could claim he was robbed, and, with the scars to show for it, no one would be likely to challenge his word. *I reckon there are a lot of men who would try it*, he thought. *Not me, but a lot of men*.

After dinner he slept a while, and came awake later with the same thought in his head. Not me, but a lot of men. And after it rattled around a while it changed to something like *Why not me? I'm no better than anybody else. I would sure see to it that Moler got it back later. I wouldn't want him to lose anything by it. It would be like borrowing it, but, of course, I wouldn't touch it*.

He made an exasperated gesture with his hand, and pushed the sorry thought out of his mind. Sunlight poured in the window, and his eyes drifted along the roll of the hills. This was a pretty place, a place of trees and deep grass, small enough to give a man the feeling of possession, large enough so his eye couldn't quite travel to the end of it and close him in. The kind of place a man would carry in his heart forever, once his eyes beheld it. Nora tried hard not to show it, but it must fill her with sorrow to know she had lost it. If there was only something he could do to spare her such a blow.

He looked at the moneybelt lying haphazardly on the table, one end hanging

down to the floor, the separate pockets bulging with currency. *I'll leave in the morning*, he thought.

If he made time, he would get to Pomeroy by noon. He reckoned the missus would win out about putting the money in the bank, and he could get it there before closing time. Then he'd ride on home. Home, to his bunkhouse, and if he stayed there another two years or so, and saved every cent of his wages, he might have about enough to do what that cash would do right now. But the chance would be gone. He called Nora and asked her to come and talk.

"I thought you were sleeping," she told him when she came in. She pulled up a chair and sat near the bed. He took her hand and held it in his own.

"I did a while," he told her. "How long do you think I got to stay here?"

"I don't know. Maybe I ought to get word to Moler. He might begin to worry."

"He sure will, if I'm a day late, but let him worry." He frowned suddenly. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"I've been trying to look ahead. I can't see much there for either of us."

"I can find work."

"Where? What kind?" He sounded angry.

"I s'pose it would have to be housework, perhaps in Santa Rosa, or on a ranch somewhere."

"Waiting on some fool woman!" he exploded.

"I don't mind, Wyatt, so long as I'm waiting for you."

"Well, I do." A sudden tumult of emotion choked him up. "It would be years."

"Maybe I could work for Mrs. Moler."

"For the missus? Good grief, you don't know what you're saying."

Nora laughed at his desperation, then bent down and put her cheek against his. "We'll find a way to make things work out."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say

he knew a way now, but he held it back. This idea that harassed him was like bog. It did no good to try to pull back. A man only got in deeper. He wanted to tell her about Dayvault's offer, but he held that back, too. It only made matters worse to think about it. "I'd rob a bank if I was sure I wouldn't get caught," he blurted out.

"Stick to horses, Wyatt," she answered and smiled again....

It was deep dark now, and he stared up at the ceiling. Moler could get along without the cash for a while. He had more of it stowed away. Once Wyatt got started on Dayvault's broncs, it wouldn't take him long to make it up. He'd tell Moler he felt that much obligated when he paid him back. It isn't as if he were actually stealing.

I wonder how he got his start. Handed to him on a dish, I s'pose. Or some way he isn't apt to talk about. More power to him. Fine words are pretty things when they don't cost too much.

He stirred restlessly, shifting from side to side, twisting the covers into a snarl, but the argument went on and on inside of him. First he stood on one side of it and then on the other, and, in the end, he couldn't have said why he took the course he did. Disgust, more than anything else, engulfed him, but he got out of bed, strapped on the moneybelt, pulled on his clothes, and cleared out.

THE postoffice in Pomeroy was in the merchantile store. Moler's letter was waiting for Wyatt. *Dear Wyatt—it read—The missus says to deposit the money in the bank. Hope you enjoyed your trip. We are expecting you on Tuesday. There's work to do. Very truly, C. Moler.*

He went outside and sat down on the gallery. His chest felt tight under the bandages, but the shooting pains were gone. The bank was across the street. It still hadn't opened for business. Remembering Dayvault's talk, Wyatt wondered whether it was closed for good. He knew most the

people going past to work. The saddlemaker recognized him and spoke. "I hear you've been to Frego Junction."

Wyatt nodded. "I took some horses to Dayvault. When does that bank open?"

The saddlemaker scratched his head. "Well, generally at eight." He gave Wyatt a rueful look. "Generally." He went on, then stopped, and came back. "I don't like to say anything, and it's none of my business either, but—uh—you said you were waiting for the bank to open."

"Yeah."

"I—I s'pose Dayvault paid you and you want to uh—uh—"

"Yeah," Wyatt said.

The saddlemaker scratched his head again. "Well, remember I don't say it's shaky, I wouldn't say such a thing, but I always feel a little sorry for Moler and well, I—I don't know. There's been talk. I took mine out. You ought to use your own judgment, it seems to me."

"Oh," Wyatt said, and the saddlemaker hurried on.

Wyatt got up and walked slowly down the boardwalk. Then he came back and sat down again. There were four horses at the hitchrail. A man he hadn't noticed before was bent down between them, prodding away at the rear hoof of one of the animals. He finally gave it up and stepped onto the boardwalk. "Don't know but what I ought to get him shod," he remarked. "He's lame, but I can't find a thing wrong." He came closer. "I heerd say you was waitin' for that bank to open. So'm I, but I don't reckon I'll wait any longer. Not after what I heerd. How much you aimin' to put in?"

Wyatt him a slanting look. The man was a stranger. He wore dirty ragged clothes and had a hard trail-worn look. His gun had a strip of wood split off the handle. His eyes were sharp and fiery. "Uh—not much," Wyatt finally answered.

"Well—" the stranger paused as if reconsidering—"No, I'm not goin' to risk it." He climbed his horse and rode away.

Wyatt waited a while longer. He read Moler's letter again. A man unlocked the bank door across the street. The green shades went up. The bank was open for business, but Wyatt didn't go across. He had come this way in the dead of night to be finished as soon as possible with this trust Moler had imposed on him. But he couldn't finish it recklessly. In spite of Moler's letter, he still owed it every advantage he could find for it. He owed it his courage and strength and judgment. He owed it risk and caution, and if he slighted any one of these he was betraying himself. That much he had learned on his ride through the night, and if these things rode him to his death, like a cougar on a horse's back, he must live with them until they did. In the end, he kept the money in the money-belt and rode on in grim and stony silence.

Past town, he slanted onto a narrow trail that would get him home and let his horse find the way. His eyes closed many times, and abruptly opened to scan the far and nearby places. He tried to settle what his flight from Nora would mean to her, and whether a letter would set it right. Not likely, if all the letters he had written her these past two years had failed to give her the faintest hint of his devotion.

The trail dipped down into a narrow slot that ran into a deep wash. The horse moved at a slow walk. The moment it could see around the sharp corner of the wash's cut-bank, it stopped. Its head swung to one side. Its ears perked up. Wyatt's boot lifted to give the animal a prod, but he quit before it landed. A frown creased his forehead.

He leaned forward to get a look, but pulled back before he saw anything that might have attracted the horse's attention. It might be nothing more than a rabbit hopping by, or a swallow nesting in the cut-bank, or a bunch of grass quivering in the wind, but he got down and pulled the horse back out of sight. Then he went back up the slot on foot until he could climb out,

and took a careful look into the wash, getting down on all fours along the cutbank to make a survey.

Clumps of willows grew along a dry creekbed, and he caught sight of a horse standing behind one of them, the same lame animal that had stood at the merchantile hitch-rail in Pomeroy. He couldn't locate the owner.

Wyatt flattened out and looked straight down over the edge. He could see the bank was undercut, deeply in some places, but he couldn't locate the man. He moved nearer the slot and tried again. This time he located him, but he had to lean far out, and when he tried to push back the overhand gave way and sent him down to the bottom in a thunder of dirt, dust, and rubble.

The roar of a gun followed him down. A stone hit him in the back, and he thought it was a bullet. Before he hit bottom, his gun was in his hand. He stopped himself, belly-down, facing the slant.

Rubble still poured down, raising plumes of dust. The other man crouched behind a rock at the top of the talus slope where the cutbank started. He fired a shot, and Wyatt fired back. His bullet hit the rock, whined off, and buried itself in the cutbank, raising another trickle of dirt. Swallows swooped out of their holes and cruised frantically overhead. Puffs of dirt leaped up around Wyatt, creeping closer. He hit the rock again, and again the bullet ricocheted and dug into the cutbank. This time it brought a big piece down and flushed the bushwhacker out of cover.

He came down the talus slope in long leaps, firing as he came, the weapon making a drumroll of sound that knocked back and forth between the steep walls. Before he got to the bottom, Wyatt caught him. He caught him in midair, and when he landed his legs wilted under him and he rolled the rest of the way down. He didn't move when he reached bottom. Grudgingly, the thunder of the guns poured out of the wash.

Wyatt got up and took a look. This was

the man who had warned him not to put Moler's money in the bank, pretending he had some of his own he didn't want to risk. But his pockets were empty, except for a yellow-edged Wells-Fargo dodger that identified him as Jack Spang. His fiery eyes were still open, but the fire had run out of them for good.

ALL this delayed Wyatt considerably. He had to return to Pomeroy with the body, and while he was there the sheriff definitely identified the bushwhacker as the man on the dodger. It was past noon before Wyatt started out for home again, and it was long past dark when he got there, but the Molers were still up. Moler was surprised to get the money, and it made him a little cranky to think that Wyatt would go against his orders. "It seems to me my letter was clear," he said.

"I heard some talk about the bank I didn't like," Wyatt explained. "So I made up my mind I wouldn't take the risk."

"Well," Moler said, as if he didn't like it, anyway. After Wyatt stepped out, he counted the money. He counted it several times, but couldn't make it come out right.

"The total was seven hundred and eighty-seven dollars, and fifty cents. Now we subtract ten dollars for that Buzz Early bird, and that leaves seven hundred seventy-seven dollars and fifty cents, but there's only seven hundred seventy-seven dollars here. It's fifty cents short. You try it."

Mrs. Moler got the same results.

"Now I wonder what he did with that." He threw his pencil down. "That's the trouble. There's always something when I can't tend to it myself."

"Well, you can speak to him tomorrow."

"Yes, I will."

When Wyatt got to the bunkhouse, he lit the lantern and found his notebook and pencil. He sat down on the edge of his bunk, wet the pencil with the tip of his tongue, and started to write. It was a letter

(Continued on page 114)

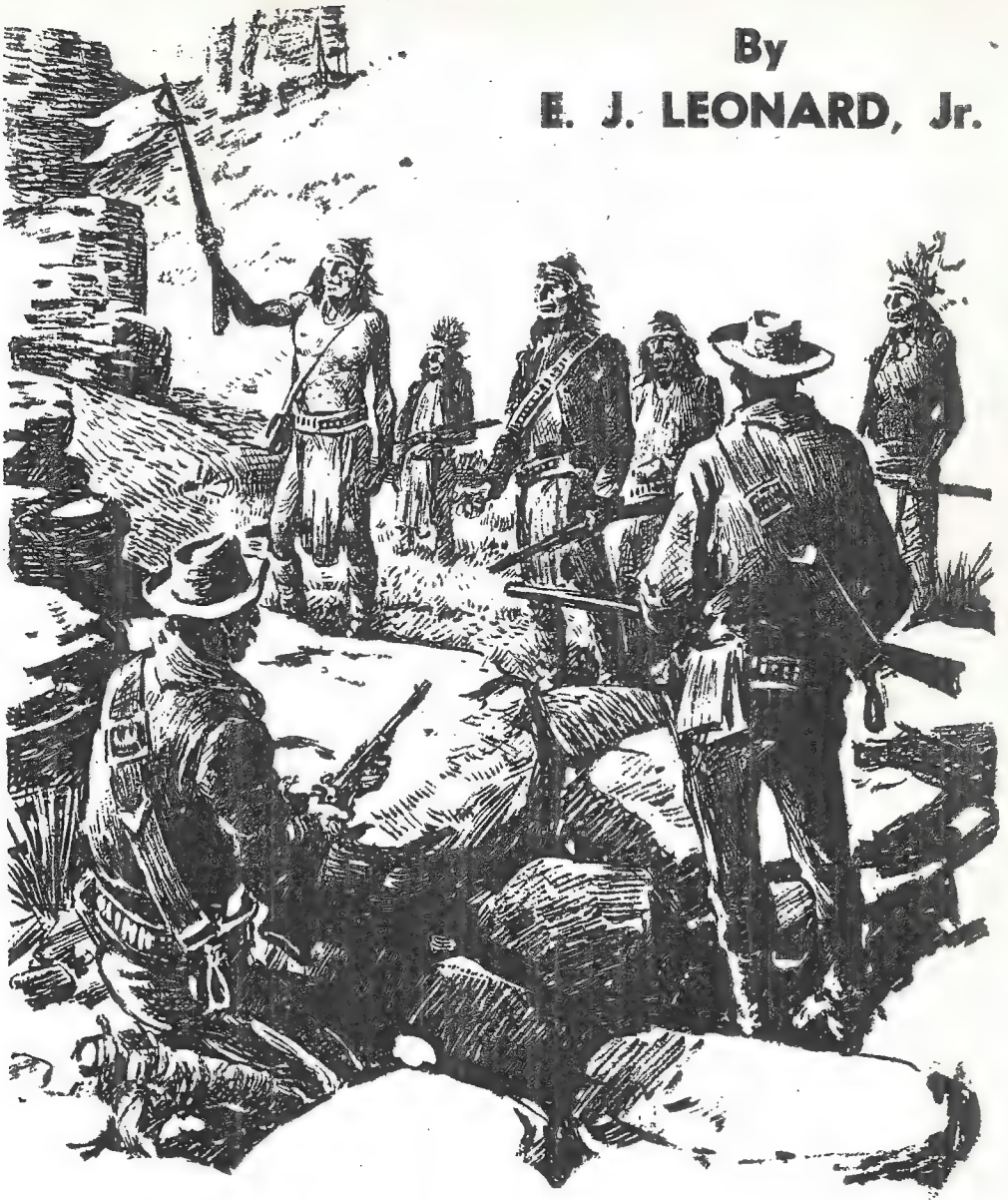


"Tell Lacayuelo that white flag or no white flag, I'll shoot his damn eyes out if he doesn't start talking about Byerlein!"

RED HELL HITS CANYON DIABOLO!

Nine painted Apache braves and six haggard troopers, they faced each other across a dead campfire and fought an eerie, silent war—with the strangest weapon men ever staked their lives on!

By
E. J. LEONARD, Jr.



THEY called it Canyon Diablo, but for no apparent reason. Like everything else it had advantages and disadvantages, good points and bad ones, depending on the time of the day, the season of the year, or who happened to be occupying the canyon at a given time. At this particular time, two hundred feet up the south wall, a solitary disadvantage stood motion-

less on the narrow ledge, watching the small group of riders on the open plain approach the dark defile that led into the canyon. A dozen feet above his head the rock sloped back abruptly straightening into the flat tableland. Directly below, the wall extended in a sheer drop to the canyon mouth; but a few yards to his right the canyon wall buckled with loose rock and thorn brush,

sloping gradually out into the open plain.

A fifty caliber buffalo rifle rested on a waist-high boulder in front of him, pointed in the general direction of the riders. His gaze followed the same line, his face motionless, though the sand-specked hot wind nudged shoulder length, jet-black hair and forced his eyelids to lower slightly, so that he watched with eyes that were slits against the glare. Eyes that were small, black, bullet-like . . . staring at the riders with a cold-steel hate. It is easy for a Chiricahua Apache to hate. It is doubly so when his vision is filled with the sight of *blanco* horse soldiers.

Lieutenant Gordon Towner reined-in his patrol at the signal from the rider fifty yards ahead. Matt Cline, the civilian scout, wheeled his pony and rode back to the officer and six men.

"Did you see him, Lieutenant?"

"Did I see whom?"

Matt Cline's jaw bulged, a wad of tobacco accentuating his creased, ruddy face, and the short brim of his hat was low on his forehead casting a shadow to the tips of his straggly, black mustache. His lips were parted slightly by the tobacco bulge of his jaw and barely moved when he spoke. He pointed ahead to the mouth of the canyon three hundred yards away, and then his arm swept up to the top of the south wall. Pointing up, his lean, heavily-veined arm stretched from the sleeve of red flannel underwear. He wore no shirt. His suspenders crossed the sweat-stained, colorless undershirt and attached to dark serge trousers that tucked into high, dust-caked boots. Across his lap he held a Remington-Hepburn.

"See that ledge runnin' along near the top of the wall? Well, not a minute ago one of our little friends was up there." The scout ended with a stream of tobacco juice spurting into the white dust.

The lieutenant pulled the brim of his floppy, gray field hat closer to his eyes and squinted ahead to the canyon entrance. A hundred things raced through his mind, and

everyone of them was a question. It was his patrol and he was supposed to have the answers. That's why he had a commission. But the face bore a puzzled expression. It was young, and lobster-red, and told openly that he was new to frontier station, though he had learned all the answers at the Point. You hesitate when it's your command, your responsibility. When a dirty old man in an undershirt is studying you to see what you've got, waiting to pick you apart. And if he finds the wrong thing, the buzzards do the rest of the picking.

"Mr. Cline, the primary objective of this patrol is to locate and bring in Trooper Byerlein. If in the process we come across hostiles, it is also the duty of this patrol to scout them and deal with them using the best means at hand. I would judge that there is a rancheria somewhere in that canyon. I don't think their band could be very large, for I know of no Indians at San Carlos that are unaccounted for. Now that we've found one, or possibly a band, we'll have to act quickly before they get away."

"You got it wrong there, lieutenant," the scout said. "We didn't find him. That Indian found us."

"Perhaps I'm wrong, but I'd observe him to be a lookout. Now he's obviously fled after being seen."

"Only thing wrong with that, lieutenant, is that you don't observe an Apache when he's on lookout. I don't know what your experience is, but I hear this is your first patrol out of Fort Thomas. You might as well learn right now that when you spot an Apache like that, it's because he wants you to see him. Right now there could be a dozen of 'em hidin' on that rocky grade goin' up to the ledge. If we was to ride to the mouth we'd see him again just a little way further on. Then you'd go further and you'd see him again. Until he led you to the right spot. There'd be a lot of shots and you'd go back to Thomas draped over your horse face down. If there's anybody left to lead the horse."

And so they learned. The lieutenant faced the scout, but was silent. It wasn't the best thing to have been said in front of his men. Above all, they had to have confidence in him. He waited until he felt the heat of embarrassment drain from his face.

"What do you suggest, then?"

Matt Cline shifted his chew to the other cheek. "Well, it looks like Byerlein's tracks go into the canyon, which means they probly got him. It's one thing trackin' a deserter, but it's another goin' into an Apache rancheria to get him. If he's there he's either dead or half dead, so there's no worry there anymore." He pointed to a splash of green that crept between low hills a mile to the north of where they were standing.

"I think we'd better wait and move over to those pines until Sinsonte shows up. He'll cut our sign over to there without any trouble. Maybe he'll know just what we're up against."

FROM the edge of the pines they watched the canyon entrance across the empty stretch of desert, and the shadowy defile that slashed into the mountainside had eight different meanings. But it flicked through everyone's mind that it was a place where you could die while never seeing what did it. Six enlisted troopers prayed to six interpretations of God that the young lieutenant wasn't a glory seeker . . . at least not on this patrol. So the men sprawled in sand and grass, their bodies relaxed—though it's a singular type of relaxation only a little more than a mile from the Apache. Eyes are ever watchful. The lieutenant and Cline sat a little apart from the men. Towner pulled at the sparse tufts of grass nervously, looking around in every direction, but mostly toward the canyon.

"How do you know you can trust Sinsonte?" It was more than just making conversation. "He's an Apache just like the rest of them. How do you know he isn't eating with that band of hostiles right now?"

"Well, for one thing, army chow's spoiled him," the scout answered. "He probably wouldn't even touch mescal anymore if somebody baked it for him. I been scoutin' with him goin' on five years now and I don't have no reason not to trust him. The day he turns around and lets go with his Sharp's at me, why, then I'll quit trustin' him."

Cline smiled at his joke. "Course he ain't always been a scout. He was with Cochise ten years ago, shootin' all the whites he could, long as he needed a pony or a extra few rounds, but that was just some-thin' in the past. To an Apache what you did a long time ago hasn't got much bearin' on what you happen to be doin' at the present. And I don't think he got along too well with Cochise, though he was with him since Apache Pass. 'Course, he won't come right out and tell you. See, Sinsonte is a White Mountain Apache, and for some reason—buried somewhere in his past—he's got a full-fledged hate for Chiricahuas. That, along with army rations, is why he's the best tracker at Fort Thomas."

"Uh huh," Towner grunted. "So you think the hostiles in the canyon are Chiricahuas." It was half-question, half-statement of fact. The words of a brand-new lieutenant, willing to learn, but wishing he could have picked his own instructor.

Cline said, "I don't see how they could be anythin' else. If they're all accounted for on the reservation, then they must be ones that come up from acrost the border. When we was roundin' up the bands to bring them to San Carlos and Fort Apache, a bunch of 'em slipped through the net and streaked south for the Sierra Madres, and nobody could dig 'em out of those hills. Now, every once in awhile, bands of 'em come raidin' back into Arizona for horses and shells. They're carryin' on a little war with the Mexicans and have to keep their supplies up. Everybody'd just as soon they never come back. They got some good leaders . . . Chatto, Nac'iez, old Nana and

Loco. And now I hear about a upstart medicine man who's gainin' influence. Name's Geronimo. I'd bet the bucks over in that canyon are part of that band."

An hour after sundown, Lieutenant Towner was still sitting at the edge of the pines, repeatedly shifting from one position to another on the sandy ground. Pine tree shadows striped his soft face and made his eyes seem to shine. They were open wide. It was a long way from Springfield, Mass. A few yards out in the desert there was a muffled scraping sound, and he jumped to his feet, tugging at his holstered revolving pistol. By the time he had gotten it out, Sinsonte was standing next to him. Matt Cline came up from somewhere behind him.

"Did you find 'em?"

Sinsonte stood in front of his pony holding the hackamore close under the animal's head, while the other hand still covered the nostrils. A man can be shot even when approaching a friendly camp.

"I find, nantan." Sinsonte, a little man even for an Apache, stood with narrow, hunched shoulders. He was perhaps fifty years and his eyes were beginning to be rivered with tiny red lines, but in them still was a fire, a fire that belonged to a younger man. Besides the calico red band holding his hair in place, he wore only high Apache moccasins with turned-up toes and a white cotton breech clout. A uniform jacket was lashed in his bed roll for more peaceful days.

The two scouts crouched together at the edge of the desert for a long time, drawing obscure lines in the sand and conversing in a mixture of Apache and Spanish with only an occasional English word. For a few minutes the lieutenant leaned over their map of sand, trying to recognize a mark or hear even a part of their conversation that was understandable. Finally he turned away in disgust.

"Sergeant Lonnigan!" The old sergeant rose from the circle of enlisted men. "Issue half rations all around. No fire. Therefore no coffee." It felt good to bark an order.

Dammit, he was still in command!

"Yes, sir!" Lonnigan snapped his reply. Thirty years in the army. Seven years longer than the shavetail had even existed. But Lonnigan was used to young second lieutenants. He had served under many. He remembered one who was now a general. He remembered two during the march to the sea, and at Shiloh—they were both colonels. And he remembered dozens of others who were dead. For some reason he liked this new Lieutenant Towner, even if he was too straight out of the manual and didn't know much about Apaches. He remembered a time not too long ago when he himself had never heard the name Apache. You learned. And there are little humps of ground out behind the commissary building at Thomas to testify for those who didn't.

IN A LITTLE while Cline went over to the lieutenant.

"Sinsonte found them. Chiricahuas. He was only a few dozen yards from that lookout who tried to lure us in, and he followed him. When the lookout saw the lure wouldn't work, he headed straight for the camp to talk it over with the rest of 'em. About fourteen, fifteen. Sinsonte says from Nachez's band, but they're here with a sub-chief by the name of Lacayuelo . . . and mister, he's really a bad one. He's even hard in the eyes of most of the Apaches, and that's sayin' somethin'. I'd guess the rest of 'em are bad actors just like he is."

"Did he see Byerlein?"

"Yeah, but he was layin' on the ground in the middle of 'em, so Sinsonte don't know if'n he's alive or dead. I'd say he's half of either one."

The lieutenant looked out through the dingy grayness of the moonbathed desert to the black slash that was Canyon Diablo, reflecting on what he had been told. It made it no easier for him, but he turned to the scout abruptly.

"Mr. Cline, if Sinsonte can sneak up on a band of hostiles without being detected,

then he can lead this patrol in. Perhaps not to their camp, but at least to a favorable position from which we can make contact without being at a disadvantage. An ever present obligation to prevent the hostiles from committing further depredations in the Territory cannot be turned aside or put off. My duty is before me, Mr. Cline, and will be carried out whether you object or not." He paused to give emphasis to his final words. "So we're going in to get them."

"I don't object, mister. You're the boss. I knew ever since this afternoon that you'd be wantin' to go in, so Sinsonte and I just did a little figurin' and I think we got an answer."

"How to get in?"

"Yeah," the scout replied. "Sinsonte's leavin' now to snake acrost that open stretch. In about four hours the moon'll be down low enough for the rest of us to get acrost. We leave the horses here. And I say take all the men along, no horse guard left behind, 'cause we'll need all the carbines we got. 'Course that's up to you. The idee is to angle from here so as to land us on the north side of the mountain, three miles up from the entrance we saw this afternoon. On the north it slopes up pretty gradual, and there's a trail that winds about half-way up and then cuts down into rocky country and on into the center of the canyon. The trail in's a fair hard one to find, but Sinsonte's goin' to meet us where it starts. He's out layin' the carpet now."

to glare at the trooper and curse him out with his eyes. Now could be heard the heavy breathing as each man stretched his neck to gulp the cool mountain air. Below them the desert rolled dimly for miles, and in the distance was a darker shadow. The clump of pines they had left hours before. From the ledge where they stood, a narrow defile slashed into the mountainside, its rock-wall sides rising over a hundred feet. The trail twisted from view thirty-odd yards ahead.

Cline said, "You never see the end of this one until you're there. She bends around so much."

Towner studied the approach. "You followed it before?"

"A few years back, but I don't look forward to walkin' down that aisle not knowin' who I'm goin' to meet." He looked around restlessly. "It beats me where Sinsonte is. If he don't show in ten minutes, we'll have to go on. This ain't no place to be perched when the sun comes out."

By five, the small band had threaded deep into the defile. Sinsonte had not come. The narrow passage had widened considerably, but it was a slow, exerting grind over the sharp rock and through the biting chaparral clumps that dotted the way. Towner had ordered absolute silence, but the order could not mute the metallic scrape of issue boots on hard rock or the rattle of stones kicked along the pathway. They kept their lips sealed and bit off the urge to curse out the army, the Apache, the sun-bleached country and the Lieutenant Towner.

They were experienced men, combining one hundred and sixteen years of active service, and they knew what it was to walk up to an enemy. Walking slowly. How to march without speaking, without thinking, the vigilance being inbred. Many soldiers experienced it, but you had to fight Apaches to really know what it meant. Walking down a narrow trail in the heart of a Chiricahua stronghold, a soldier will even smile at the thought of the arid, glaring, baked-

CHAPTER

2

The White Flag

The moon claimed it was near three o'clock when Cline halted the seven cavalymen on a broad ledge half-way up the mountain slope. It had been hours since anyone had spoken. Neither the tedious climb nor the circumstance allowed for talk. Only once a teeth-clenched curse followed a misstep, and Towner turned long enough

sand parade at Fort Thomas. There is a feeling of security there, though you wouldn't go so far as to call it home.

And Gordon Towner had his thoughts. Did Cook say anything about a similar circumstance? It was true, he was afraid, but more of doing the wrong thing, giving the wrong command, than of the Indians. A twenty-three-year-old boy from Springfield, leading his first command against an enemy, Chiricahua Apaches. A command that consisted of a sergeant, five privates and a grizzly old scout who would have to learn more respect for an officer of the United States Army.

The single file column stopped abruptly at the sign of Matt Cline's arm raised above his head. The trail narrowed again to less than ten feet across, and the path was partially blocked by clumps of thick bushes; but it was evident that they were near the end of the passage. Cline was moving ahead to scout the brush when the low moan of a single Apache voice reached them. The scout stopped dead and the voice went on in a broken-tongue chant, groans mixed with the chopped Apache words. He listened for a minute and recognized the death chant and went on, knowing what to expect.

Towner watched him approach the thick bushes and then stop and look to the right. He took a step toward the wall where a pile of loose boulders jutted out into the path, but stopped long enough to wave the others ahead. Behind the jutting rocks, in a shallow niche in the wall, Sinsonte sat propped against the wall mumbling the death chant through lips smeared with blood. At first glance, it looked as if his whole face had been lacerated, but in another second Towner saw that all the blood poured from his eyes, or where his eyes had been. He moved his legs stretched out in front of him and the feet wobbled loosely, turning too far to the sides, uncontrolled, the way they will when the tendons have been slashed. Sinsonte would never follow another sign.

Cline lifted his revolving pistol and placed it in the old Indian's hand, but he turned quickly to Towner who was looking the other way, swallowing hard to keep down the bile that was rising in his stomach.

"Come on, we got to get out of here." He was about to say more but his sentence was cut short by the singing ricochet of a bullet over their heads.

"They're behind us!" Lonnigan shouted and turned bringing his carbine up.

"Hold your fire, Sergeant! Everybody up!" Towner had his hand gun out and waved the men ahead with it. He waited until they had all followed Cline through the bushes, and then sprinted after them.

They scrambled over the rocks into the boulder-strewn clearing, glancing uncertainly at the four canyon walls that seemed to stretch to the sky, offering no avenue of escape. From somewhere to the left a volley of shots split the stillness scattering the soldiers behind the handiest bits of cover. Low clumps of mesquite dotted the clearing, but offered no permanent protection to the troops.

Matt Cline took a snap shot at a mound of rock and brush fifty yards away over which a thin wisp of smoke was rising, then shouted to the lieutenant to spread the men out and follow him. It took him only a few seconds to grasp the situation and decide what course to take. There was only one choice. With the men behind him, Cline raced for a small clump of trees that grew out from between the rocks at the base of the right side of the box canyon, directly across from where the shots were coming.

Their backs were to the Indians firing from the well-concealed places along the left wall, but they ran well spread out, dodging and ducking, continually changing course to offer as difficult a target as possible. The firing was intense during the fifteen or twenty seconds it took them to reach the trees, but then died off abruptly as the last man vaulted the natural rock

barrier and dropped among the trees. Not a hit. It was always a consoling thought that the Apaches never had bullets enough to waste on practice.

THEY took crouched positions five to ten feet apart behind the natural barricade of rocks and trees, pointing their carbines out between the rocks. And they waited. At their backs, the jagged canyon wall, veined with crevices and ledges, loomed skyward.

The lieutenant searched the cliff with his gaze, but could see the top in only one place through the dense trees. Apaches could get up there, but they wouldn't see anyone to fire on. No, the danger was ahead, among the rocks not three hundred yards away—and you couldn't see it. But he was satisfied with his position. It was small, right under the wall and not more than thirty yards wide. It wasn't a position you could hold forever, not without food and water. Still, the young officer was satisfied. There was no place the scout could lead them.

He nudged Cline. "Do you think they'll try to run over us?" He spoke in a low voice, as if afraid the Indians would overhear.

Cline shifted his chew, looking out over the clearing. He only occasionally glanced at the lieutenant. "Mister, I've known Apaches all my life—I even lived with them when I was a boy—but don't ask me what I think they'll do. Nobody knows what an Apache's goin' to do until it's done. I don't think even the Apache himself knows. But," the scout reflected, "I know they ain't goin' to come whoopin' across that open space if it means some of 'em gettin' killed. He's a heller, but he don't stick his neck out."

"Lieutenant!"

Towner and the scout crouched low and crawled to the trooper who had called.

"I think they're comin'. I seen somethin' move," the trooper said, pointing. "About twenty feet from the other side."

The scout squinted hard through the low branches. "Hell, yeah, they're comin'! Look!"

An Apache showed himself for a split second, disappearing into a shallow gully near the spot where the trooper had pointed. Cline threw up the Remington-Hepburn at the same time and fired, the bullet kicking up sand where the Indian had disappeared. "You got to shoot fast or there's nothin' to shoot at." The last word was on his lips when he threw the piece up again and fired. "Damn, they move fast!"

Individually, then, the soldiers began firing at the darting, crawling, shadowy figures that never remained in sight more than a few seconds. They fired slowly, taking their time, with a patience that started for some of them at the first Bull Run. They knew what they were doing. They knew how to make each shot mean something.

From the opposite ridge came a heavy fire, continuing for almost a minute, keeping the soldiers crouching low behind their defenses.

"Keep shooting, dammit!" Towner screamed down the line. "They're moving up under fire cover!"

He turned to his own position in time to see the blur of a painted face and a red calico band loom in front of him not twenty feet away. The Apache was screaming, coming straight on, bringing a Sharp's to his shoulder when Towner raised his hand gun and fired. The face disappeared in a crimson flash, and for a split second a picture of Sinsonte passed through his mind. He stared between the rocks where the painted face had been. He saw it still. Gordon Towner had killed his first man... and sometimes it will do something to you.

Cline called over, "Good shootin', mister." But Towner didn't hear. He was squeezing off on another creeping shadow. He had been baptized.

They were firing continuously now, seeing more Apaches than there actually were.

Every few minutes someone would yell, "I got one!" but most of their bullets whined harmlessly off the rocks and into the brush and sand. On to the middle of the day the cavalymen pecked away in this fashion, firing sporadically at every cover that might conceal an Indian.

They were holding their own, successfully keeping the hostiles at bay, whittling down their number, except for one disastrous occurrence. An Apache who had crawled unbelievably close, was shot through the side as he dove for a cover, but the bullet did not stop him. He leaped to his feet and goaded himself on with a frenzied scream that brought him to the top of the barricade. If he was going to die, he didn't intend to die alone.

It all happened in a few seconds. Private Huber jumped up just as the Indian fired his heavy buffalo gun from the waist, and the ball caught the trooper square in the throat. At least four shots ripped through the Indian's body as he swung the heavy rifle like a club and smashed it against the side of a head. He teetered for a moment and then fell forward, still clutching the Sharp's, onto the lifeless bodies of Privates Huber and Martz.

And when a man says one cavalryman is worth ten Apaches, he is a fool. It is certain he was not at Canyon Diablo that July day in '78.

SHORTLY after noon the firing slackened gradually and finally died out altogether. Not an Apache was in sight. They were certain that at least two or three were still out in the middle somewhere, but if they were, the devil himself was hiding them. A hot breeze sang through the canyon, shifting the sand and stirring the mesquite clumps. The movement of the wind was all the more eerie contrasted with the dead stillness of the canyon. There was not a human sound. The sun struck fiercely into the boxed area, the shimmering heat waves mixing with the sand-specked breeze

to form a gritty element that you could almost stick with a bayonet. It was hot, blistering hot, and the lack of water made it all the worse. That, and the overpressing reality that out there, somewhere, were Apaches, Chiricahua Apaches with the smell of blood in their nostrils. It set a stage of silence and tortuous, eye-strained waiting.

Towner and Cline squatted next to the two heaps of stones that covered the dead cavalymen. Since burying Huber and Martz they had spoken less and less. It was getting late in the afternoon. The silence and back-breaking vigilance clung all the heavier, daring conversation or a moment of relaxation. But Towner was getting tired.

"If we ever get out of here I'll send back for them to be buried at Thomas," he said.

"I don't think they'd care one way the other now," the scout replied. "I know I wouldn't. What difference does it make if . . . Well, I'll be damned! Look at that!"

Matt Cline jumped up and pointed with his carbine toward the other side of the canyon. A white flag waved a few times above the grayness of rock, then an Indian stepped cautiously into the open carrying the flag tied to the end of an antiquated Springfield.

As he advanced, five Apaches jumped down from low ledges along the wall, and as they walked slowly toward Towner's position, three more Apaches appeared as if out of nowhere to join them. They had been hiding in the open area since giving up the sneak attack hours before. As the soldiers watched them advance, they wondered how the devil they could have missed seeing the three hiding right out in the open. Towner wondered if it wasn't just an excuse to gather up the warriors who had been stranded. Matt Cline wondered if the Springfield that bore the white flag was loaded.

The nine Apaches were still a few dozen yards away. Matt Cline leaned toward the lieutenant.

"I figure they're out of bullets or they wouldn't be playin' games. I'd say they want to get close, catch us off guard and finish the job with knives. If they had shells they could sit back there for a week and wait for us to come out in the open or die of starvation. It's gotta be a trick. Whatever you do, for God's sake don't trust 'em!"

Towner held his revolving pistol at his side. "Which one's Lacayuelo?"

"That little one with the cavalry jacket on, next to the one carryin' the flag."

A few feet from the defense line the Apaches stopped and Lacayuelo came on alone. His brown chest and stomach showed through the opening of the filthy, buttonless jacket. An empty cartridge belt crossed his chest and left shoulder. And an inane grin showed protruding teeth, forming a parallel with a smear of yellow paint that extended from ear to ear across the bridge of his nose. Like the others of his band he wore Apache moccasins that reached to his knees; but unlike the others whose only covering were light breech clouts, he wore ragged, gray trousers that tucked into his moccasins. His headband, holding back shoulder-length black hair, had once been a bright red, but now was a grease-stained, colorless rag. Three of the others wore small bush clumps attached to their headbands. At two hundred yards you wouldn't see them.

Lacayuelo began gesturing and speaking rapidly in the choppy, sound-picture Apache tongue. Matt Cline listened without interrupting, until he was finished, and then turned to the lieutenant.

"To make it short, he says there's no reason why we can't all be friends. He says just give him and his warriors some shells so they can hunt and keep from going hungry, and everybody'll be happy. He says he can't understand why we attacked him and his peaceful huntin' party."

Towner stared at the Apache. He took his campaign hat off and shook his head. "Does this animal understand English?"

"Enough to get by, but it would take him till Christmas to tell you anything."

The lieutenant continued to stare at Lacayuelo and his eyes narrowed. "Tell him he can go to hell with his hunting. He and his party are under arrest. Tell him he's going back to San Carlos to stand trial for murder."

Cline passed it on to the Chiricahua subchief who grinned and replied in only a few words.

"He says you can't arrest him, because he's here under the protection of a white flag. He says you have too much honor to disregard his sign of truce. He's a sly old devil, throwin' it back in your lap."

"Ask him what he's done with Byerlein."

The scout turned from the Indian after a minute. "He says he doesn't know what you're talkin' about. He says we're the first *blancos* he's seen in two months."

"He does, does he." Towner had not taken his eyes from the subchief since he stepped forward. Now, still looking full into his face, he raised his revolving pistol and pulled back the hammer. "Tell Lacayuelo that white flag or no white flag, I'll shoot his damn eyes out if he doesn't start talking about Byerlein."

Cline hesitated. "Mister, he's got more men than we have."

"He's got more men without bullets. Tell him!"

Cline passed it on and the words made the Apache lurch forward a half a step, but he looked into the muzzle of Towner's gun and stopped dead. He studied the young lieutenant, looking him up and down, taking his own good time; and finally must have decided that the *blanco* wasn't joking, for all at once a broad grin creased his evil, sun-scarred face and he was as friendly as could be. He jabbered to Cline for almost two minutes and then turned abruptly and walked away. The other Apaches followed.

"Where the devil are they going?"

Cline said, "He says he sees you're a friend of the Apache, he's invitin' us to

his rancheria for some refreshments. We're supposed to follow. He's thinkin' of somethin'. I say stay here."

Towner only glanced at him. "When you're in command, Mr. Cline, you can say that. Lonnigan! Spread out behind me. Mr. Cline, you'll walk at my side."

Five cavalymen and a civilian scout walked slowly across the canyon floor, following the Indians by fifty yards. The sun had begun to drop behind the western canyon wall so that half of the boxed area was in shadow. Towner and the rest strode from the dark into the light and followed the Indians to the other side, then through a narrow defile into a side canyon. They walked into this new clearing where four wickiups stood and a dozen or so ponies were tethered on the other side of the canyon meadow. And they approached the Apaches with almost a swagger, a show of indifference, for they were cavalymen of the "5th" . . . though they had only nine bullets between them.

CHAPTER

3

Tizwin!

For an Apache rancheria, this one was comparatively clean, but it only testified that the Indians had not been there very long. The four wickiups were in a semi-circle, and two cook fires, close together, were in the center of the half-moon area. Lacayuelo and his warriors sat in an irregular circle between the wickiups and the dead cook fires. He rose to one knee as they approached and beckoned them to join the circle; but Towner stopped the group on the opposite side of the cook fires and watched the Indians pass from one to the next a bulging water bag made from horse intestines.

Towner turned his head slightly. "What are they drinking?"

"Tizwin, most likely," Cline said. "Or mescal." He watched the Indians drink. "I wouldn't put any pesos on it bein' water."

"What the devil's tizwin?"

"Apache corn beer. Knock you back to the States if you drink enough. Makes a worse Indian out of a bad one. I don't know what it'll do to a hardcase like Lacayuelo. He wants us to join 'em."

"Corn beer, eh," the lieutenant muttered almost to himself. And he had a most uncommon look in his eyes.

Sometimes it seems as if certain men are set aside to do great things, while others have to play the role of the fool or the coward, predestined from all eternity. But if you look close into every case, and that means everybody in the world, you'll see a time, a circumstance where a judgment has to be made that either makes or breaks the man. Sometimes luck helps. But it happens often in the army—especially on frontier station—and it was happening now to young Gordon Towner. Fortunately, he knew it. And wasn't afraid to push his luck.

"Mr. Cline, tell the filthy scoundrel that we'll be only too happy to join his soiree." And then to Lonnigan. "Sergeant, turn your bully boys loose. They can drink all they want—long as it's more than the Indians."

They sat where they had stood, on the other side of the ashes of the cook fires, ten to fifteen feet from the Apaches. Lacayuelo sent the water bag over to them—it turned out to be tizwin—but gestured and argued loudly for almost an hour for the *blancos* to join his circle. He was drinking all the time, like everyone else, and finally gave up his pleading when he saw that it was no use. The fly would not venture into the web. Perhaps he felt that ten feet wasn't far anyway.

The soldiers raised their baked-clay cups drink for drink with the Indians, carbines or hand guns across laps, eyes ever watchful over the cup brims. It was a strange setting: the savage and the soldier, mortal enemies, ~~drinking tizwin~~ together, each watching for the false move. But the strangest sight was Gordon Towner. He was at

least two cupfuls ahead of everyone else. He repeatedly drank down the warm liquid with one toss and raised his empty cup as a sign for more. He drank without speaking never taking his eyes from the Apache subchief. Lacayuelo met the *blanco* chief's gaze and felt more than the distrust. There was a challenge also. And he would try to drink his *tizwin* as rapidly.

Cline looked at the lieutenant anxiously. The scout was beginning to feel his drinks, and he'd had *tizwin* before.

"Mister, you'd better take it easy. This stuff'll do somethin' to you."

Towner sat erect with his legs crossed. "Mr. Cline, I may be young, but a long time ago my father taught me to drink like a gentleman. If I didn't think I could out-drink these creatures, I'd resign my commission."

"That's the trouble, they don't drink like gentlemen."

The lieutenant reached for the water bag again. "Play the game, Mr. Cline. Play the game." And oddly enough the words gave the scout confidence.

It was shortly after this that one of the Apaches screamed and leaped to his feet, drawing a knife from his breech clout. Five white men dropped their cups and raised pieces in one motion to cover the Apache who was about to leap over the mound of ashes. The sixth was doing quite another thing. He was laughing, and loud enough to make the Indian stop his motion in mid-air, so that one of his moccasins came down in the middle of the cook fire, the soft ashes puffing in a cloud of gray smoke. He jerked his foot up instinctively, but too quickly, so that he was thrown off balance back among the other Chiricahuas. Towner laughed all the louder.

Then he stopped abruptly and eyed the subchief coldly. He spoke slowly, carefully, to make certain the old Indian would understand.

"Lacayuelo, why do you bring boys to do the work of men? I have heard many tales

of how brave the Apache warriors are, but now I see that these tales must surely be false. For what I have seen of the Apache makes me believe that he is an old woman or a very little boy. You do not sit like men of dignity and calmly drink your *tizwin*. You scream and jump and would commit murder if you had the chance. That is because your hearts are black. You do not have the hearts of true braves. I have come the distance of twenty sunsets to see the Apache because I have heard so many tales of wonder and bravery. And now I see he cannot even drink a few cups of *tizwin* without turning into the desert dog. Surely this is not something a man can be proud of." He glanced at the scout. "Tell these other beasts what I said. I think Lacayuelo understood. Look at his face."

LACAYUELO listened again as Cline repeated the words, and his face grew darker. As he rose to speak, his eyes were bleary from the *tizwin*, but he controlled his voice well, speaking slowly so that his thick tongue would not jumble the words.

"The *mejor* speaks as man much wiser than his years would have him be. You are young, and I start to grow old and I can see what you are doing. Your words have stabbed our hearts. You tell us we are not men. I tell you, I know what you are doing. Still, we will sit and drink *tizwin* and by'n by I show you Chiricahua is more man than a *blanco*." He spoke gravely, solemnly. "You have called us many names. Now I will show you they are not true. Now you must show me that you are a man, or I shall call you not only woman and little boy, but dead fool!"

The men understood now, fully. It was a contest. They were pitting their ability to drink against the Apaches'. They understood well what would happen to the loser. And they understood that they relied completely on the young Lieutenant Towner to keep the Indians drinking. Occasionally, a man would laugh to himself, *How the*

devil did I get into this! But it was a hollow laugh. For the most part there was silence, a deathlike silence, for that's what was in the air. It stretched from one line of men over to the other and it held them transfixed. This was the most serious drinking any trooper had ever done—and it went on and on, into the dusk.

The Indians were becoming dim outlines in the grayness when Towner ordered the fire. Lonnigan worked cautiously, facing the Indians, though his feet were very unsteady. He cursed with a thick tongue the matches that kept going out in his fumbling fingers, but soon he had a good fire going. Across the flames, Towner watched the shadows dance on the faces of the Apaches. In the orange light they were fierce, grotesque, black smudges hiding eyes filmed and bulging with hate; but he noticed other things too. Eyes that closed, opened, then closed again for a longer time. A head would nod. Soon one of the Apaches, without a sound, fell back and lay motionless.

Within the next two hours, three more Indians slumped into unconsciousness. But not without continued prompting from the lieutenant. He drank his cupfuls down without hesitation, and when an Indian faltered for a minute, or would spill the liquid in his drunkenness, Towner was alert to sneer and goad him on to more.

Lacayuelo watched his strength melt away with the hot liquid, but he was powerless to do anything. At one time he began a chant, a song telling of all his warrior deeds; but the *blanco* chief howled with laughter. And when the Apache staggered to his feet to cross the fire, the lieutenant stopped laughing and stared at him silently. It was a look of contempt. A look that said, *I told you you were not a man.* And Lacayuelo fell back to show this insolent *muchacho* what a man really was. But it was becoming more difficult each hour.

The end was near. Lacayuelo knew it. His eyes moved up and down the line of his warriors. Only two were in sitting posi-

tions, but their heads drooped chin to chest. Neither had taken a drink in almost an hour. He looked across the dying fire. The scout lay belly-down on the hard ground, his arms outstretched unnaturally pointing in the direction of the three troopers, motionless on their backs. But the sergeant was still awake; head hanging, but awake. He would move slowly, the Indian thought. And the *blanco* chief still faced across the fire, his hat brim low masking his eyes. He could be asleep....

The Indian swayed as he rose to his feet, leaned too far forward and fell to his hands and knees, tripping over the extended foot of one of the prostrate warriors. His head was clear, he could think, but his body would not react with the same accord. He stumbled as he rose again, this time shattering the pottery cup against a rock.

He looked quickly to the *blanco* chief. The form danced and swayed before his blurred vision, but that part which was the head did not move. The eyes still cloaked by the hat brim.

But now there was another motion. He stumbled forward kicking dirt into the dying fire and then stopped dead, swaying on feet spread slightly apart. He squinted hard to make the *blanco* chief stop swinging back and forth, and as the film fell away and the rotating motion slowed, he saw the revolving pistol pointed at his eyes. And through the piercing ring in his ears he heard the hammer click into cock position. It was all over.

Towner watched the old Indian sink to his knees slowly and then fall forward, rolling onto his side. He had the urge to pull the trigger, even though it was not necessary, even though it was all over. From across the glowing pile of ashes there was neither the sign of motion nor the hint of it.

He nudged Lonnigan who lifted his head momentarily, grunted, and then eased his thick body slowly backward until he was lying down. Like the others, he was past

caring. Towner stumbled as he crossed the fire, his feet moving as if iron fetters were attached, but he shuffled on until he stood before Lacayuelo. He looked up and down the line of prostrate forms that revolved slowly on the ground, and then back to the subchief, shaking his head and blinking his eyes. All through the night his will power had been using brute force to goad his body on, lashing the sinking feeling away with, *Show the savages!* Now it was over, and he could feel himself being drawn into the black nothingness of utter exhaustion. But there was one more thing to be done.

He bent over the still form of Lacayuelo and looked at his clothing closely, at the filthy jacket and ragged pants. Then the issue belt caught his eye. It was polished, gleaming. He unbuckled it and drew it off. The first thing he saw was the stenciled name on the inside—Byerlein. That was all. He drew his arm back and brought the barrel of the revolving pistol down upon the Indian's skull. And as he staggered down the line of unconscious figures, he brought the weapon down again and again against the heads of the Apaches. When it was finished, he felt better.

IT WAS forty miles back to Thomas. Forty blistering, dry miles through the furnace that was central Arizona. Miles that cramped legs and jolted heads already racked by the after-effects of Apache corn beer. And there were nine Chiricahua hostiles who had to be watched, watched with a sharp eye; though their feet were lashed beneath pony bellies and their skulls throbbed with a brutal pain.

Just before sunset, the riders, caked with alkali dust and heads bowed, rode across the parade at Fort Thomas. Colonel Darck stepped to the front of the ramada before his quarters to receive the lieutenant who had wheeled off toward him.

"You lost some men, lieutenant." The colonel volunteered only this observation. It could mean anything. His opinion would

come later when Towner made his official report. This meeting was simply a courtesy. "You look all in, Mr. Towner. Not used to the weather yet, eh? What do you say to a whiskey before cleaning up?"

The colonel spoke about it for years after. Of course he was polite about it, but it was the idea. The young lieutenant was the only officer Darck ever knew to refuse a whiskey punch after finishing a blistering four-day patrol. ● ● ●

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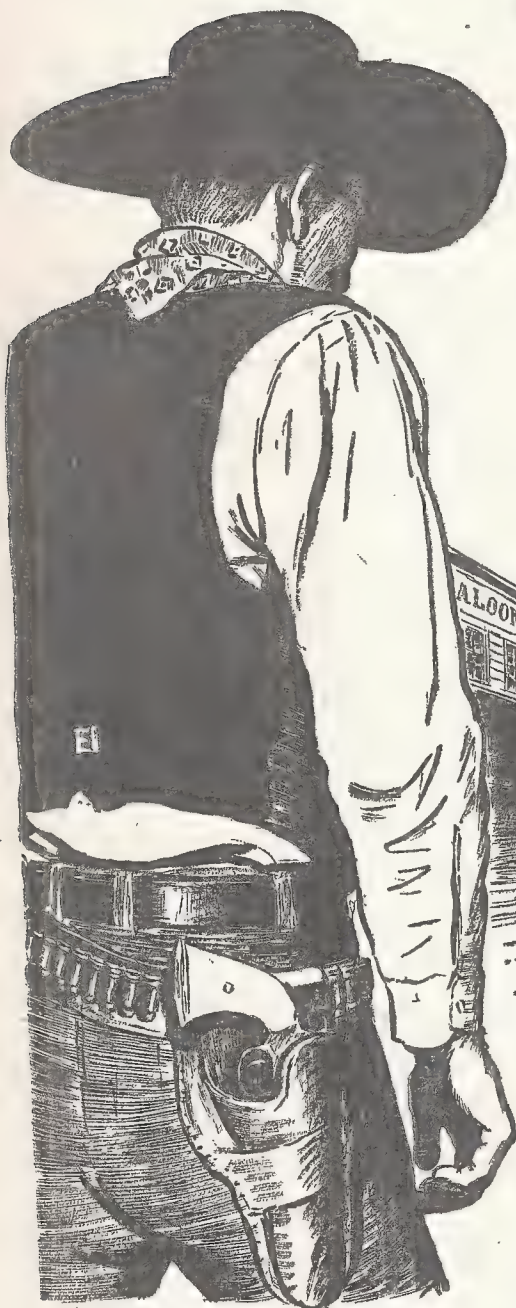
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GUNSMOKE INTERLUDE

By
**CLIFFORD
D. SIMAK**

In this man's town, cowboy, you either turn your guns in as soon as you ride in—or you prove your right to wear 'em!



There was still time to unbuckle his guns, Clay told himself. . . .

THE great black horse was lame and Clay was half asleep in the saddle when they came to Gila Gulch. It was no place nor time to stop, for the border was just a day ahead and John Trent just a day behind. But there was no choice. The horse would not last another day and Clay needed food and sleep and

that last day's ride would be the worst of all the nightmare flight, for it went through a tortuous mountain spur where the going would be neither fast nor easy.

In front of the livery barn, Clay slid from the saddle, led the horse inside.

"Give him the works," he told the livery man. "He's earned it."

Clay's eyes went over the three horses in the stall.

"This all you got?" he asked.

The man nodded. "Business shot to hell," he said, "ever since the town got all pure and saintly. Used to have a dozen in here, but not any more."

Clay looked at the three horses again. They were sorry beasts, none of them the kind of horse he needed.

"This one of yours won't be traveling for a while," said the livery man. "You pushed him pretty hard."

"Stepped on a stone," said Clay.

He went outside and stood for a moment, hitching up his gun belt, sizing up the place.

Gila Gulch slept in the early morning sun, quiet and dusty, but with an unpainted, weather-beaten look about it even in the softness of the sun's first light.

He walked down the street to the place that said *Hotel* and went into the bar entrance. A barkeep was dusting off the furniture and he took his time getting back behind the bar.

"I need something," Clay told him, "to cure my saddle sores."

The barkeep set out a bottle and a glass.

Clay took them and walked to a table and let himself down easily into a chair, for the first time feeling the utter weariness that almost a thousand miles of riding had hung upon his massive frame. He pushed his hat back off his forehead and slapped dust off his legs. Then he shoved the glass aside, uncorked the bottle and raised it to his lips.

He set the bottle down and wiped his mouth and felt the liquor hit his stomach

and explode and warm his whole insides.

But it didn't taste the same, he told himself. It didn't taste as good as it tasted once. It failed to take hold of him the way it once had taken hold of him.

A lot of things, he thought, aren't the way they used to be.

A fly buzzed nerve-wrackingly in the silence of the morning, trying to get through a window pane.

Clay sat sprawled in his chair, thinking of the way things used to be, ticking off the names of men who now were dead, of women who were almost forgotten, of towns that were no longer anything but names.

THE barkeep leaned upon the bar and picked his teeth with a sharpened match end. Clay kept on sitting there, drinking every now and then.

"Want some breakfast?" the barkeep asked.

"Breakfast and room," said Clay. "I'm way behind on sleeping."

"What you want for breakfast?"

"Anything you got," said Clay. "I'm not particular."

He was eating breakfast when the kid came in with the star shining on his vest.

The kid walked over and sat down across from him.

"First time in town?" the kid asked.

Clay nodded.

"I got to tell you then," said the kid. "We got a rule around here about checking in your guns."

"I'm a stranger here," said Clay. "I hadn't heard about your rule."

"You check them in," said the kid, speaking free and easy. "When you leave town you get them back again."

"And if I don't?" asked Clay.

"You're heading into trouble," said the kid, businesslike and crisp, but still with friendliness.

"I'd feel undressed without my guns," said Clay, thinking that he couldn't very

well tell the kid John Trent might come riding into town and he would need those guns.

"Anyhow," he said, "I'm going straight to bed. I don't aim to cause no trouble."

"I'll give you until sundown," the kid told him evenly. "At sundown I'll walk up the street. If you aim to keep those guns, you be there to argue, or I'll come in and get them."

"I'll be there," said Clay, and he said it matter-of-factly, for that was the way it was. That was the way it had been many times before. It was just a part of living. And, anyhow, this brash kid had no idea who he was calling out.

He ate in silence after the kid had left, the barkeep leaning on his elbows and still picking at his teeth.

Later, in his room, lying on the hard bed and staring at the ceiling, he thought about the kid and the star he wore and the way he talked, not tough or mean, but businesslike and calm.

And those kind, Clay told himself, were the ones to be afraid of. Although Clay had not been afraid of any man for many, many years. He was not afraid of men and he no longer cared for men. He no longer cared, he forced himself to admit, for anything at all. Not even for his own life, probably, although he'd never thought of that before.

And now here he was, staring at the ceiling. Here he was, one day away from freedom, one day from the moment when he could put his past behind him and start a new life. Lying there, he wondered what he had to start a new life with.

A hundred thousand dollars, of course, tucked away across the border, and that was a lot of money. But it was all he had. He'd have a new name, too, but that didn't really matter. Names never really mattered. A hundred thousand dollars safe across the border and ten thousand on his head, with John Trent riding hard just a day behind to collect the ten thousand.

He'd ride out in the evening, on one of the sorry nags at the livery stable and although the horse would not be the kind he wanted, it would take him where he wished to go. But before he left, he'd have to kill the kid, and that was a bothersome thing to have to do at a time like this.

I'd rather not kill him, he thought, *but he shouldn't talk so big*. He could take his guns down the street, of course, and give them to the kid and say take good care of them, I'll be back to get them along toward suppertime. But he might need those guns before suppertime and, anyhow, no one ever before had taken the guns of Coleman Clay and it was too late to let it happen now.

Too late, he thought. Too late to bring back the way whiskey used to taste, too late to give back the lives of men that went to buy the hundred thousand safe across the border.

He closed his eyes and sleep hit him like a hammer.

THE sun was low in the western sky when he awoke and went downstairs. A team of horses stood at the rail in front of the hotel, hitched to a ramshackle buckboard. A man was talking with the clerk.

"I'm checking out," said Clay.

"That'll be two dollars," said the clerk.

Clay paid him and asked, "Got some paper and a pencil? I want to write a letter."

The clerk nodded. He tore a sheet of lined paper from a cheap tablet and handed it and a pencil stub to him.

"If it ain't too long," said the man who had been talking to the clerk, "I'll wait for it."

"Jim's the mail carrier," said the clerk. "We ain't got no postoffice here. Nearest postoffice is Buckhorn."

"You're lucky, stranger," said the mail carrier. "I just go over there twice a week. It's a long pull. Sixty miles, almost."

Clay nodded his thanks. He went to the

table in one corner of the room, wrote laboriously:

Dear Sis: I'm on my way down to Mexico to look over something. I may take it in my head to settle down there. I'll write you later.

You haven't told me where Gordon is lately. I thought maybe I'd run into him, but I haven't.

He signed the letter with a name that was not Coleman Clay and went back to the desk to get an envelope. He went back to the table and addressed the envelope to *Mrs. Esther Blaine, Pontiac, Ill.* Then he took a roll of bills out of his pocket, peeled off half a dozen, folded them carefully with the letter and sealed the envelope.

At the desk he bought a stamp and the clerk reached down behind the desk and brought up the mail bag. He held its open mouth toward Clay and Clay dropped the letter in it. The clerk jerked it shut.

"There you are," he told the mail carrier, shoving the pouch across the desk.

The mail carrier picked it up. "Got to get going," he said.

He started toward the door, then turned back.

"If I was you, stranger," he said, "I'd change my mind. That kid is pure poison with his hardware."

"No," said Clay.

"All right," said the mail carrier, "have it your own way. Sorry I can't stay and see it."

He went out the door and the clerk and Clay stood silently and watched him climb into the buckboard and wheel the team out into the street.

"This marshal of yours," asked Clay, "what might be his name?"

"Blaine," said the clerk. "Gordon Blaine."

Clay clutched the edge of the desk and hung on so hard that his fingers grew white beneath the tan of sun.

"Gordon Blaine," he said, and he kept his face unchanged even while his fingers whitened. "Never heard the name before."

"Nobody else did, either," said the clerk. "He just came out of nowhere. This town killed four marshals before he took the job. Ain't no one tried to kill Blaine now for a month or two."

Clay laughed and turned away from the desk like a wooden man. He marched out through the door onto the porch.

The sun was setting.

Clay remembered the letter he'd called

(Continued on page 113)



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By Steve Frazee

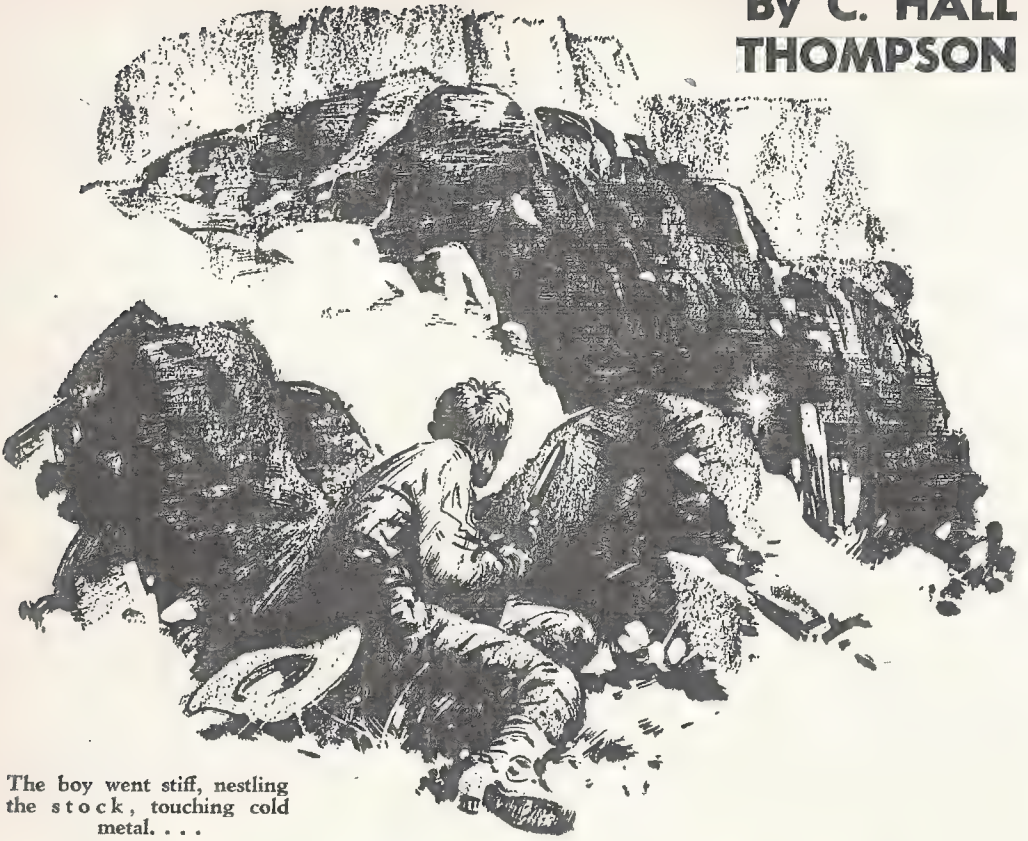
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**STAR
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By C. HALL
THOMPSON



The boy went stiff, nestling the stock, touching cold metal. . . .

TRADE SECRET

Selden hadn't taught the kid everything he knew about the fine art of shooting a man in the back, but there are some things a man can figure out for himself. . . .

SELDEN couldn't get shet of the boy. All the way upriver from La Cruces, he had tailed Selden's blue roan. From the saloon backroom where Selden made the deal to the stretch of new farmland, where he would do the job, the boy had tagged along.

When Selden bedded down; another camp was only a short stretch back; when Selden glanced over a shoulder as he rode, he saw the dust of a pinto lift against the

heat-hazed sun. And, for three nights, while Selden huddled in a hill crotch, studying the movements of the farmer below, the boy waited, a mere whistle away in the aspen shadows.

Came the fourth night, he got up nerve to show his face. He stood at dusk in the tall grass on the rim of Selden's look-out post. Selden did not move. He lay belly-flat, the rifle under-hand. He watched the boy's quick eyes and lank pale hair.

The boy said, "You're the one McCloy hired."

Selden ran fingers along the barrel. "You better git, kid."

"You're supposed to bushwhack that farmer."

Selden's grizzled, wolf-lean jaws clamped shut. A finger curled on the trigger.

"You don't have to worry, Mister Selden."

It made Selden blink. The boy had guts. Or he was loco.

"I just want to learn," the boy said quietly.

HE CAME and sat cross-legged in the growing dusk, his own Winchester propped across bony knees.

"You make a lot of money."

Selden did not answer. He eyed the plow-furrows below, the soddy and the leanto barn. The darkness came down slowly. Higher in the hills, a horned owl screeched.

The boy said, "They pay you plenty to gun a man."

Narrow eyes flicked over him. "You know a lot for a kid."

"Not enough. Men like McCloy'll pay plenty to get rid of these nesters."

Selden smiled the thin brutal smile of an aging hardcase. "There's always a McCloy. Always somebody who'll pay to get rid of somebody else."

"That's why I want in."

Selden almost laughed in his face.

"Go home, kid. Your mother wants you."

"I mean it, Mister Selden."

"I told you once. . . ."

The sharpness of it died and Selden frowned. He watched the rabbit-taut face, the too-bright eyes. A crazy kid could raise a ruckus that'd spoil this whole pitch. If that sodbuster ever heard queer noises in these hills. . . .

Selden said, "You think you got the stomach?"

"I want money. A lot of money."

"It ain't easy."

"I'm a crack shot."

"And you don't mind what you shoot at?"

"I want money."

Selden eased back, staring at the distant sodhouse lights. Enough, he thought. Just enough to make it convincing.

"You want the know-how?"

The boy nodded.

"I wise you up, you'll clear out?"

The boy nodded.

Selden said, "It's a matter of habit. All his days, a man follows a pattern. All you do is study the sign. This farmer, every night, before he turns in, he makes a round of the barn. Every night that lantern he carries come bobbing along. A perfect target. One more night, I'll check. And, tomorrow night. . . ."

Sinewy hands jacked a shell into the rifle chamber.

The horned owl screeched and a mountain cat answered angrily.

The boy swallowed. "They pay you good."

Selden made that smile. "Real good."

The promise wasn't broken. Quiet enough, sure-footed in the shale, the boy left. For a long time Selden lay in the dark smiling.

Greenhorn kid. Thinking he could bull his way in. Just like that, a hardcase-like Lewt Selden would hand his trade secrets to a skittish colt. Selden laughed softly. Hell, there wasn't but one real secret in the trade: Never tell anybody anything.

Night was black on the hills and the flats below. Cold pinpricks of stars gave no light. Selden stood up slowly.

The lantern would play a part in it, all right. But, not the part he had told the boy. Firing in the dark would be taking too big a chance—unless you were only a yard from the target.

Selden led the blue roan with care, down the slithery trail, always on the win-

dowless side of the sodhouse. He left the horse a short run for the barn, ready for the quick getaway.

A mare whickered softly and he stood still. His hand closed on the barn latch and lifted. The stalls smelled of musk and dung. A spiderweb brushed his cheek. He found the lantern on a hook by the door.

Habit. He was smiling again. How could you depend on habit and be dead sure? But, if, of a sudden, a farmer heard noise from his barn; if he saw the flicker of a lamp just lit and came out to investigate . . . From behind the blinding glare of the lantern, Selden would fire point-blank.

He swung wide the door. The lantern shutter creaked.

He struck the match along one thigh.

HIGH grass stirred in the crotch of the hill and the pinto snuffled uneasily. The boy went stiff, nestling the stock against a shoulder, touching cold metal.

Crazy old coot, that Selden. Giving away all his trade secrets, figuring a green kid wouldn't take advantage; thinking a kid would be dumb enough to tell all his own plans.

The boy pictured the surprise on Selden's face when he came back tomorrow night to do the job. He pictured McCloy shelling out to a sharp youngster who had worked faster than an old hand like Lewt Selden; gunned a troublesome farmer with the know-how of a professional.

Smiling, he sighted down the barrel just above the sudden yellow bobbing of the lantern and squeezed the trigger. ● ● ●

STEER CRAZY!

IN THESE days of dollar-a-pound steaks and people living in trailers for lack of room to build a house, it is hard to realize how much meat and land a man could have had in Texas in the old days just for the asking.

When Texas drew up its state constitution, it gave every head of a family a league of land, about two and three-quarter square miles of homestead. In those days, no man could have cultivated that much land.

Also, at the time, Texas was covered with roving bands of wild longhorns which were free to anybody with energy enough to chase them down and kill or brand them.

Thus every Texan had more land than he could cultivate, and all the free cattle he wanted. He was, in fact, land poor and cattle poor, for he had no money.

The Texans were too far from market to sell much of the beef. And so they did the next best thing. They butchered the cattle merely for the hides, which found a ready leather market in the East. Thus for a while, some of them did right well, killing cows, throwing away the meat and merely selling the hides.

But there were so many hides available that they soon glutted the market.

Then somebody thought up another one. They started butchering the cattle and rendering out the tallow and selling it. A wild longhorn was about as lean as a cow could get to be and survive, but in the rendering pot he would supply a few pounds of tallow. So into the pot went the whole carcass, where it was boiled up for the little tallow it would provide.

It is hard for people to realize the appalling waste of beef that this hide and tallow butchering brought about, but it must be remembered that beef itself was worthless because of its abundance, and Texans had no money. Those longhorns went into the tallow pot so that Texans might live to sell dollar-a-pound steaks today.

Allan K. Echols

PAY ME TEN YEARS!



Bob ducked in time to miss a volley of gunfire spurting through the window.

By DOC WINCHESTER

Bob had paid ten years for Brent's crime. Now it was Bob's turn to collect—with interest—for a hundred, bitter months!

A YEAR ago a certain gent in the Big House at Elkhorn had given Bob Farnsworth a piece of advice. "Hightail it to the Concho Rim country in New Mexico," he told Bob. "Hunt up a feller by the name o' Tom Brent. He's ramroddin' the Rim and he'll own it someday if he don't get his meat too loaded down with lead. Tell him Old Jeff sent you."

Bob picked up another piece of advice at the Big House. It went along with the cheap store clothes and the five-dollar bill they gave Bob along with his freedom.

"You're still a kid, Bob," the warden had said. "Stay in the right kind of company. Maybe you wasn't guilty of the crime you served a stretch for; nobody but you knows that. Chalk it down to experience. Go straight, you got chances." The warden looked at Bob kindly. "I know what you're up against, Bob. But try it out. There's people that won't understand, but there's a lot that will. *Hunt out that kind and stick with 'em.*"

Shepherd talk. But Bob had liked the warden and he had given his medicine a tryout.

It wasn't hard at first to get jobs with the big outfits. But holding down a job was something else. There would come a whisper: "Jailbird!"

Bob would ride on again, slowly drifting his trail in the direction of the Concho Rim.

"No room in this outfit for a gent that's done a stretch!" the foreman of a spread had told him.

"You might be packing a hungry loop that wouldn't fit in with our ideas here, mister!" All along the line.

Sometimes they would josh him about wet gunnysacks, or the best way to carry a hot running iron. But there wasn't a job.

Bob never went to the trouble of explaining anything. He'd just move on with his tail between his legs and his belly dragging. Living on cottontails; getting a little more hollow-eyed; looking a little more like a gutted snowbird. It wasn't any big surprise when he found himself within a few miles of the Concho Rim and Tom Brent.

Tom Brent! Ten years since he had heard that name spoken by anyone except Old Jeff. Old Jeff had mentioned Tom Brent more than a few times. Old Jeff with his owlhoot memories! his old, faded

eyes looking back over a one-way trail; dark nights with the moon right.

Bob had never told Jeff he knew Tom Brent. That he was serving a stretch that Tom Brent should have served. But he couldn't tell Old Jeff that. The old outlaw wouldn't understand how a man could be as yellow as he was. And too, he knew that when he got out he would probably throw in with Brent. Lick his boots for a job. Crawl on his yellow belly. He'd tell Brent he hadn't coughed up his guts. Tom Brent would take him on for some of his dirty, bushwhacking jobs. At least, Brent wouldn't give a damn about him being a jailbird.

Ten years! That far back Bob had been a slim, bony, half-fed kid on a dry strip in Arizona. He and his dad had been nesters in a land of sudden juries with ropes over the limbs of branchy trees. Dim memories, but they were coming back with vivid, clean-cut pictures. The way he had lived in terror. The certain conviction that his dad would wind up on the receiving end of a tie rope.

Then there was the day when Tom Brent had first come to their layout, riding a broom-tailed cayuse; something evil to fill his kid's soul with nightmarish horror; boogery eyes, guns slung to his flat hips.

TOM BRENT and Dad had talked in low voices for a long time. It was late morning when they had rode away together. Dad hadn't returned for a week. After that his trips were more frequent. In a few days he would come back, urging his leg-weary mount, saddle pockets bulging, a jug of whiskey slung from the saddle horn. Dad Farnsworth had an easy conscience when it came to forking it on the wrong side of the law. It was this that young Bob feared, hated with all of his heart.

Another night came back with vividness. Bob had been out to the corral where the mesquite brush grew to a man's head. He

had been alone for a week and his hair was spikey from fright. He heard footsteps prodding through the thick growth.

A blot stepped into the rays of the battered lantern Bob held up shakingly. It was Tom Brent, snorting like a locoed cow. One hand circled the butt of his sixgun, the other was wrapped in the loose folds of Dad's shirt. Brent was dragging Dad Farnsworth who staggered from loss of blood. Somehow Bob had helped Brent get his father into the shack and stretched out on the built-in bunk.

Dad had a six-shooter cached under his war sack pillow. Easing his hand under the bag, he dragged the gun out. Like a released spring the old man had sprung erect, the cocked .44 covering Brent. There was a pile of meaning in the grin that cut across Dad's face.

"You got her figgered out t' steal the only good horse on the place, Brent. You got her figgered wrong. That spotted horse belongs to the kid, and he's riding out o' here. These doings we been mixed up in ain't any of the kid's medicine. You can take her a-foot, Brent, or wait for the posse!"

Then Dad turned to Bob. "Fog her, son! Don't stand around like a cow waitin' t' be milked!"

The bony kid's dad was an outlaw; he'd do time or stretch a rope. The kid bawled as he threw the old stiff-skirted saddle on the back of the spot pony.

His dad had swung for one of Brent's killings and the kid rode on his lonely trail, never free, the shadow of fear following him. Then Brent crossed his trail again. Brent was hightailing it ahead of a law posse. With a surly laugh the outlaw had stepped his mount. He left the kid with a wind-broken horse and took the spot pony. That swap had pinned Brent's last stage stickup on Bob Farnsworth. And for that stickup the kid began his stretch at Elk-horn.

And now he was back in Brent's country.

The rustling of the leaves along the outlaw trail had spread the news that Bob was yellow. Even the refuge of renegades was closed to him. The ranchers didn't want a convict. Tom Brent was all there was left.

BOB rode down the slope that led to the bottom of the Concho Rim Valley. An old deserted cabin was the only landmark of its kind in the wild Concho Rim country. Tragedy had earmarked it with bullet holes in its sodden logs. A crude sign, lettered with wagon grease, was nailed to the plank door. It read:

NO NESTERS WANTED.

Bob watered his horse at the spring water hole near the old cabin. He was in Tom Brent's country now. His green eyes narrowed as he gazed across the blue haze of the valley. He wondered if he had guts enough for the bushwhacking jobs Brent would hand out to him. It took a little nerve to shoot a man where his suspenders crossed . . . he'd make it, all right. He'd make a good hand for Tom Brent to take along—

The report of a gun, thin like a rifle shot, came to his ears. Bob toed into the saddle. A half mile away a team of bays were hauling a wagon at a high lope. About a hundred yards behind the running team he saw a band of horsemen. They were shooting at the running wagon.

Bob eyed the bouncing wagon. The driver was standing up in the wagon bed, lashing the frantic team. Another figure knelt in the vehicle in a shooting posture. The rough ride was spoiling his aim. He could see the stabs of smoke go wild over the heads of the horsemen.

Nesters! Bob thought. *They're headed for the cabin.*

Well, if he was going to get his hand in killing nesters, now was a good time to begin. His hand reached for the rifle butt beneath his leg.

The wagon driver's hat blew off and a trail of black hair flew loose in the wind.

Bob could tell the driver was a girl in spite of the levis and the denim brush jacket. The wagon bounced high over the boulders. The man crouching behind the girl was old; his long, white beard streamed out like a horse's mane.

The horsemen chasing the wagon were gaining.

Bob Farnsworth's mouth cut to a thin line. His eyes slitted.

"Hell of a bunch of road agents," Bob said aloud. "Chasing an old man and a girl that way!"

His thumb lapped the hammer of his carbine. One of the gang was taking a short cut, trying to head off the wagon before it reached the old cabin. Bob took a chopping shot at him. His lips cut into a strange, twisted grin as he saw the man buckle over his horse's neck, then fall in a rolling sprawl. The riderless horse ran free, head to one side to keep from tromping the reins.

The girl and the old man spotted Bob. He waved them on and tickled the ribs of his horse. He cut in between the wagon and the horsemen. The riders saw Bob and fanned out, surprised. Bob knew their surprise wasn't going to last long. But the wagon was gaining. A hundred yards and they'd make it!

Bob swung behind the trail dust of the wagon. The riders began spurring forward again. Bullets hummed so near Bob he could feel the *sput* of air. Anyway, he had checked the little game—had them taking a look at their hole card. A hot sear scalded the side of his head. The next second he hit the ground running. The wagon had rolled to a stop. The girl and the old man made the inside of the cabin and held the door on its strap hinges open to keep Bob from running headlong into it. The girl was breathing hard and her eyes were frightened like antelope he had seen.

Bob poked his rifle barrel through the one window in the cabin, shattering the window pane. A dozen men were circling the hideout, Indian fashion. He put a

shot in the middle of a beefy hombre. He saw the man twist, throw his rifle into the air, then fall backwards over the horse's rump. The animal bucked savagely, pounding the man's back and shoulders, snapping his head like a bull whip. The riders scattered for cover. From brush and rock a barking staccato thudded into the logs. Bob ducked in time to miss a volley of gunfire spurting through the window.

Bob didn't look at the girl, but he could feel her standing over against the wall. He even sensed that her hair was hanging down like, that it was soft and wavy in the dim light. She continued to breath heavily.

Bob took a quick glance at her, saw her parted lips draw to a smile.

"My name's Bob Farnsworth—what's yours?"

She had a hard time keeping the tremor out of her voice.

"I'm Mary Neilson and this is my father, Colonel Neilson."

"Nesters?" Bob asked.

"Yes, we're nesters—at least that's what Tom Brent calls us. That's him and his outfit outside.

"Thought it might be the Brent spread," Bob answered.

A BULLET ate into the rotten wood of the window sill. Bob was flattened against the wall beneath the window. He slipped cartridges from his belt into the breech of his rifle.

Something was happening inside him. He wasn't scared! Wouldn't it be funny as hell if he'd step out in the daylight and call Brent's hand? His old Dad and warden would get a big laugh out of that! Bob Farnsworth, the yellow-bellied kid from the Elkhorn pen, packing a gun fight to Tom Brent!

He swung the gun at his hip to an easy feel and ejected an empty shell from the carbine. There was a lot of things worse than being dead! Being yellow for one! He

grinned at Mary Neilson, and the grin showed in his clean, white teeth and lit up his green eyes.

Bob wasn't conscious that Colonel Neilson was following him as he ducked his head beneath the low frame of the door. The old man's carbine was ready for action and there was a glint in his faded blue eyes.

Tom Brent knew Bob in spite of the years that had passed. He scowled as he sat his saddle, forearms across the horn. Then he grinned, but his mouth was hard, and his eyes had the coldness of blue ice.

Brent turned to his men in a bantering, hoorawing tone.

"Any you fellers see the same thing I do?"

"Cain't quite make out what it is. Might be one of them side-hill gougers!"

"Gouger hell! A gouger's got high pockets on one side and a hip down one the other."

"Maybe we aught t' rope it and take a look for brands and earmarks. Like as not it belongs to some of the nesters."

But Brent's slitted eyes were aware that Bob wasn't the scared kid he had known in the old days.

"What's your game, Farnsworth?" he demanded.

"I'm the doc from Elkhorn, Brent. I come with your medicine!"

Brent's eyes pulled apart and he felt a cold chill jolt his spine. He wasn't expecting that kind of a move from the jailbird, Bob Farnsworth. He wasn't having any part of the kid right now—let one of his men take care of him.

A burly half breed, that Bob knew as Tony Gentry, stiffened in his saddle. A gun filled his hand. Tony hadn't been picked to ramrod the Brent gang for his lack of guts.

Bob pumped his gun, putting two quick shots in the breed's middle.

Another shot from the old colonel's rifle, barked in the center of Brent's gun-

men; and two more of their horses were riderless.

Then hell exploded, acrid smoke filled the air, drifting in pungent, gray mists.

A deadening thud rocked Bob to his bootheels, causing him to drop his rifle from numbed fingers.

Colonel Neilson had been hit, for he was on his knees, fishing his gun out of the dirt, a crimson streak staining his white hair. Getting on his feet again he was getting in a deadly dose of damage.

Bob shook his head to clear the cobwebs. Lifting his Colt, he triggered the hammer. A Brent man, gun empty, tried to ride Bob down with his horse. A bullet from Bob's six-shooter bored a hole between his eyes.

Brent horses were running wild, bucking empty saddles, squealing and fear-crazed.

Bob couldn't watch the colonel, but somehow, with shuttling eyes, he was conscious that the old man's hand had exploded in a bloody mass of tangled muscles and fibers. But the doughty old warrior was being sided for once and he was playing his string out. Bob, with feet spread, body leaning to a jackknife bend, triggered with deadly aim.

The Brent rannies were fanning out now. Bob lost track of Brent. Some of the renegades were getting their belly full and taking to the badlands. Half a dozen were staying with the fight and giving an account of themselves, the rest sprawled in grotesque postures, their jaws lax, their guns flung over the tramped ground.

A shot shattered Bob's right arm. He took aim with his left hand, his face grimaced against the pain. The gun bucked and a man crumpled, arms swinging loose, knees buckling.

Acrid smoke in thin drifts helped Bob fight against the black wall of unconsciousness. He spit dirt out of his mouth and knew that he had fallen. A lone rider from the Brent gang was fogging it. The war was over!

BOB staggered to his feet, blood dripping to his boot toes. He nearly fell through the black wall that kept rising before him.

Then suddenly he came back with the snap of a bull whip. A few feet from the cabin door, Tom Brent held Mary Neilson against his chest with a hairy paw. With his right arm he swung a .30-30 carbine, trying to operate the lever for a pot shot. Mary was fighting like an Apache squaw with both her hands in his hair. Brent had slipped away from the gang and had entered the cabin while the fight was on. The outlaw struggled frantically to free himself from the agonizing grip in his hair.

Bob staggered towards them, trying to get there quick, to hit Brent over the head with his six-shooter.

Brent was playing it safe—keeping the girl between himself and nester lead; trying to get to a horse; playing for a fast vamose.

Bob lessened the distance between them.

"Stay in his hair, Mary! Comb the cockleburs out of his mane!"

Bob was coming in close. Then he saw Brent back into the wagon tongue and fall sprawling. The spill forced him to release Mary and drop the carbine.

Bob stood over Brent, grinning down at the scowling killer. Brent's hands were spread wide behind him bracing his body, his legs were wide apart, toes turned outward.

"Stand up on your hind legs and fight, Brent," Bob said. "You've had me buffaloed ever since I was a kid. I want the satisfaction of whipping you with one hand. Get up!" He kicked Tom Brent in the face.

Brent's head rocked, but he sat there.

"Drag in the pot, Farnsworth. It's your hand." His bloodshot eyes picked out Colonel Neilson. "I've heard that old warthog is a deputy. If so, I'm turning myself over to the law. I'm under arrest, Farnsworth—you can't hit me."

Mary riding a fast horse brought the

sheriff from the county seat in less than an hour. The sheriff got busy loading the bodies of Brent gunners on the backs of their horses. He worked like he was getting a lot of satisfaction out of the job. He took a slanting look at Bob now and then as he roped the dead men to their saddles.

Doc Middleton, who followed the sheriff, was piling out of an old, wobbly buckboard, medicine kit in hand.

Mary went to where Bob stood. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Bob put his good arm around her and returned her kiss. There was a lot of things he might have said, but he couldn't say them.

The sheriff let a lid drop humorously over one of his eyes as he looked at Colonel Neilson. The colonel grinned back.

"If you want a job as deputy, you're on," the sheriff told Bob.

"Thought I might start a little spread of our own," Bob answered. "That is if Mary and the colonel see it that way."

"That's the way it looks from here, son," the old man told him.

Doc Middleton walked up to them. He ran practiced hands over the colonel's wiry old frame.

"He's got a little lead in his carcass, all right," doc said. "But you can't kill an old badger like him."

He turned to Bob.

"Might have to do some probing to get the sinkers out of you, and I didn't bring any chloroform with me."

"You won't need anything to tame him down, doc," Mary said. "I just got through knocking his horns down!"

The sheriff spread out some saddle blankets in the old cabin for Bob to lie on.

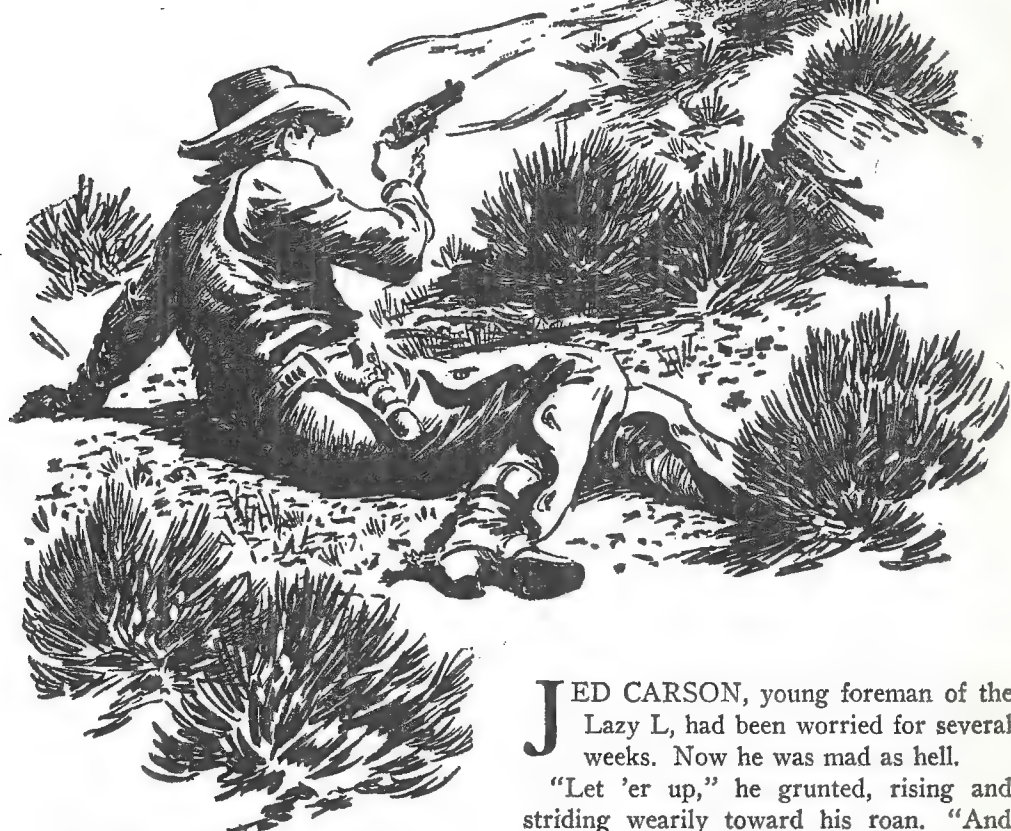
Bob kissed Mary again and went into the cabin.

There was one more thing he had to do before he started on the new life. Write the warden at Elkhorn and tell him he'd found the folks the law officer had been talking about.

THE DEADLY DOGIE

By A. C. ABBOTT

Jed Carson was almost happy when he stumbled on a nest of quick-trigger rustlers. As long as he was busy swapping lead with them, he wouldn't have time to worry about wild young U-Bet Howard!



Jed rolled sharply, felt gravel fly as the fellow shot, sent his own shot by instinct. . . .

JED CARSON, young foreman of the Lazy L, had been worried for several weeks. Now he was mad as hell.

"Let 'er up," he grunted, rising and striding wearily toward his roan. "And let 'em go."

As the heel roper eased up, the old cow

that had been doctored struggled to her feet. She shook her head once to muster what dignity she had left and then lumbered off, followed by her bellowing calf.

The herd began to drift away as the three holding riders came around.

Jed, putting the screw worm medicine back into a saddle pocket, glanced over the top of his saddle at an approaching rider, and his young face grew hard. Almost an hour ago this Kid, U-Bet Howard, had taken off after a yearling heifer that broke from the herd. Now he was back empty-handed, as Jed had known he would be.

Something about this slender youth with the quiet brown eyes and the loose-fitting jacket just naturally made Jed see crimson. Having a dogie like this in the outfit was irritation enough without the shifty-eyed rider, Dan, who hadn't been seen since he started on circle that morning.

As the Kid rode up, bringing old Smoke to an apologetic stop before the group, Jed took time to loosen his flank cinch. Then he gave his horse a savage slap on the belly that made that surprised and indignant animal promptly shift his belly from the North to the far West.

"So she got away from you, huh?" Jed inquired with hard sarcasm.

"No, she didn't get away!" the Kid snapped back.

"Well, damn me!"

Jed's temper flared like a pine tree struck by lightning. The Kid had never offered to go on the prod before, his very meekness infuriating. Jed looked up now at the slender face and smoldering brown eyes, and an exasperating grin slid across his face.

"I can see you got her with you," he drawled. "Under your saddle blanket."

The Kid's lips came together in a stubborn line.

"Or mebbe," Jed went on, "she's follerin' along behind you like a stray dog with her tail a-waggin', scared to get too close for fear you'll kick 'er."

Still the Kid disdained to answer, glowering down at the foreman as if he were a stranger.

Jed squared away from his horse, and the grin left his face.

"There are a thousand reasons," he said, with a strained evenness that made his throat ache, "why I shouldn't ride you with spurs. But I can't think of one of 'em! You ain't got the brains of a steer yearlin', and damned if I wouldn't rather ride with one. At least you can figger what he's goin' to do. All I've done for the last two weeks is hunt you up, or else hunt up the cattle you've choused clear out of the country. Hellsfire and damnation! Don't you think I've got anythin' else to do?"

Jed's fury, strengthened by the surprising resistance of the Kid, got the best of him—fury at himself for not having time to follow certain tracks, fury at the Judge for giving him a dogie kid to ride herd on during the busiest season he'd ever known, fury at the Kid himself for being so willing, so meek, and so—jug-headed!

He took a deep breath and continued. "When are you ever goin' to learn that when a yearlin' breaks from the bunch the only way to get him back is on the end of a rope? You can't rope, but for cat's cake! You can let 'im go, can't you? At least I won't have to spend the rest of the day trailin' 'im down to doctor 'im."

"You won't have to trail this one far," the Kid retorted hotly. "She's back there in a wash with a busted neck."

Jed, turning toward his horse, checked himself abruptly. "What happened?" he demanded.

"You can read sign, can't you?" the Kid blazed.

Jed's eyes were mere slits of ice in his corded face, but he managed one more question.

"Where?"

The Kid turned in his saddle and pointed a finger as steady and deliberate as his voice.

"Right at the other end of those horse tracks. Do you think you can follow 'em or do I have to go back with you?"

Jed took one long stride forward, his fist clenched, but the Kid's hand slapped the butt of his .32.

"You're close enough to me, *Buster!*"

For an instant Jed just stood there, straining under the fury that gripped him. Then he whirled onto his horse, rammed in the spurs, and was gone in a leaping, whirling cloud of dust. The Kid struck a lope on the trail to the ranch.

Shorty, who had seen his foreman mad once before, cocked an experienced eye at the cloudless blue above him.

"She's a-gonna rain, cowboys," he drawled in deep speculation.

"Rain?" echoed Bill slowly. "Rain, hell! Cloudburst!"

JED knew he should be ashamed of himself, but he wasn't. Damnation! A man could stand just so much. He had managed to follow the horse tracks all right, and he had also managed to read the signs. The yearling heifer had been running like the devil was after her when she kicked off into a wash that was too steep, and old Smoke had kicked off right behind her. Lucky that only the heifer had a broken neck!

Jed could also read, by the thin streak in the dust of the wash, that the Kid had his rope down and was rolling up for a try. Yes, he was willing. He'd try anything.

Jed took one last look at the dead heifer. Then he topped out and headed for the ranch, swearing to himself in a vigorous undertone.

Trouble was, Jed was worried. He was short-handed in the worst screw worm season he had known in all his twenty-five years. It kept all the men busy, doctoring on the flat, while the mountain had not yet been worked. Jed had an uneasy feeling that the situation on the mountain could stand investigation. Frequently, of

late, he had come across fresh horse tracks in odd places where he knew his own riders had not been, and he had not had time to follow those tracks beyond the thick oak brush, mesquite, and chaparral at the foot of the mountain.

This, coupled with a disappointing calf tally on the spring round up!

And to top it all off, his employers, Judge and Mrs. Lortimer, had returned two weeks ago from a month's visit up north and had brought with them U-Bet Howard, the offspring of a friend.

"He wants to be a cowpuncher," the Judge had grinned, with a wise twinkling look at his foreman.

Jed had looked the Kid over again, from dusty hat and loose fitting brush jacket to small boots, and still had not seen much.

"Heck he does," was all he had found to say.

Now as Jed rode up to the corral, he was in no mood for the Judge's instant question, "Where's U-Bet?"

"I don't know," Jed answered with deliberate emphasis.

"He rode out with you, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"But he didn't come back with you?"

"Nope."

"Come back ahead of you?"

"Yep."

The Judge eyed his foreman's back with open exasperation. "Thanks for the information," he drawled sarcastically and turned away.

As Jed approached the bunkhouse, he heard Bill ask idly from his bunk, "How's the weather?"

Shorty, lounging in the doorway, looked at Jed and grinned. "Clearin' up a little, I reckon," he answered.

"What the hell you talkin' about?" Jed demanded.

"On second look," Shorty amended, looking up at the stars, "it's still cloudy."

Jed suddenly grinned. "I guess I been pretty ringy lately," he said ruefully.

"You've had a burr under your saddle," Shorty instantly sympathized. "You reckon anythin' wrong up on the mountain?"

"Reckon nothin' but the worms," Jed answered easily, not ready to voice his suspicions.

"Huh!" snorted Bill. "Worms ain't taken to eatin' up whole cows, have they?"

Dan, the hatchet-face rider who had not showed up for the day's work, sidled up to Jed.

"Boss," he said insolently, "I'd like to have tomorrow off."

"Oh, you would, huh?" Jed eyed the man with old disfavor. "Where in hell were you today?"

"I was trailin' a bunch over on the west end."

"Who said anythin' about trailin' on the west end?" Jed wanted to know. "You knew we were workin' the flat today, and we worked it one man short."

"Gawd! You're gettin' nasty," Dan said malevolently, and Jed felt himself go cold as every other man in the room came erect. "Just because the old man brought back that lyin' little half breed—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Jed lunged forward and knocked him flat. Dan raised himself on one elbow, his face purple, but he did not offer to get up.

"It may take more than that," Jed said slowly, "to make you see things straight. That Kid happens to be a friend of the boss, and you keep your filthy tongue off of him!"

"Does this mean I'm fired? Dan asked thickly.

"I wouldn't fire a man over a personal scrap," Jed said evenly, "but you can sure as hell quit if you want to!"

"Do I get that day off?"

"No. You've had a day since anybody else has, and you'd better not *take* another day, either."

After Dan left the bunkhouse, Curly spoke up in sudden inspiration, "Let's go to town tonight. Winē, wimmen, and song.

Lots of all three. That's what we need."

"Well, I can't stand wine and I *shore* can't sing," Shorty said instantly, "but I'll take my share of the wimmen. Comin' Jed?"

"Leave the women out of it and I'll come."

"We can't leave the wimmen out of it!" expostulated Bill, horrified. "What is there to get drunk and sing about if you ain't got a girl?"

Jed eyed them affectionately. "A man's a man," he drawled philosophically, "only until he gets tangled up with a woman. After that he's just a damn fool. You boys go ahead."

AT DAWN the next morning when the horse wrangler came in, the Judge strode into the bunkhouse and shook Jed awake.

"You look like you been kicked outa hell," Jed greeted him cheerfully, sitting up and reaching for his hat.

"Feel like it," the Judge retorted. "You leave Half Pint in the corral yesterday?"

"Yeah. Was gonna pull his shoes but forgot it. Why?"

"U-Bet didn't come in last night. Smoke's out in the corral with the other horses, but Half Pint isn't."

Jed digested that news in silence. After their fight, the Kid had apparently stopped at the ranch only long enough to change his saddle to Half Pint.

Half Pint was a little bay that had been purchased the spring before from a ranch fifty miles to the southeast, across the mountains. If the Kid became lost, which he undoubtedly had, Half Pint would head, not for this ranch, but for his old home.

Suddenly Jed exploded, "Well, I'll be damn! He had to take the only horse on the ranch that wouldn't come in by himself!"

"I want you to go hunt him up, Jed. First thing."

"Hunt him up yourself," Jed retorted.

"I've got my belly full of that young—"

"You don't understand," the Judge said evenly.

"I understand plenty!" Jed flared. "He must be all of fourteen or fifteen."

"Nineteen," the Judge interrupted, "but that ~~has~~ nothin' to do with it."

"Nineteen?" Jed echoed, incredulous. "Nineteen! Hell, when we was that old we'd been holdin' down a man's job for five years!" He finished pulling on his boots and stood up. "If he stays lost three, four days maybe we can get some work done."

The Judge, after a sleepless night, was testy. "Jed," he snapped, "I'm not askin' you—I'm tellin' you! You're still workin' for me and that's your job today. Hunt that Kid up."

Jed slowly straightened, his affection for his employer forgotten. "All right," he said coldly. "I'll hunt him up. But while I'm gone, you'd better hunt up another foreman!"

The Judge turned on his heel and stalked out, while Jed slammed his gun belt around his waist and buckled it with trembling fingers.

"Ain't there a rule," queried Bill mildly, "that says nursemaids is s'posed to be even tempered?"

"Now, sonny!" quipped Curly in high pitched voice.

"Dogies is shore a bother," offered Slim blandly. "Never with the herd where a man has a right to expect 'em."

And Shorty sang lightly, "Slow up, dogies. Quit roamin' around."

Jed whirled savagely.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

The boys watched him ride, deliberate and stiff-backed, up the canyon trail and Shorty commented with innocent affection, "If he bloats up any worse, somebody's gonna hafta stick 'im."

One other comment followed Jed up the trail.

"You should have told him," Mrs. Lorti-

mer said reproachfully from behind a lace curtain.

"Hump!" The Judge gazed after the departing rider with eyes squinted against a cloud of cigar smoke. "There ain't nothin' in the world would make him take that trail if he knew the truth."

Jed took his time in following the Kid's trail up the canyon, reading the signs so easily that he could have put down in words what the Kid had been thinking about. Here the Kid had ridden to the top of a knoll to look around; here he had argued with Half Pint as to which fork of the canyon they should take; here he had spent the night squirming beside a small fire.

Jed had crossed the backbone of the mountain and had reached the floor of a canyon on the east side before he saw where the Kid had again argued with Half Pint, forcing him to turn south along a well worn trail. A trail that should not have been there!

Jed instantly knew that his suspicions concerning the mountain were justified. Cattle *were* being stolen, in two's and three's. At first, probably, just big calves forced away from their mothers, but now grown stuff and yearlings were being filtered over the mountain. Only yesterday, according to the signs, two cows and a yearling had come down this trail, followed by a shod horse.

Jed deliberately sat down in the shade and rolled a cigarette. He was still on the Judge's range, in country he knew as well as he knew the home corral. This new trail led south into steep, jagged breaks. The closest water in that direction, Jed knew, lay in Neal's Canyon ten miles away. The mouth of the canyon was almost inaccessible, but up a couple of miles the canyon widened suddenly, forming a natural corral with good grass and a good stream flowing water the year around. That, Jed told himself with a grin, was where he'd be camped if he were dabbing his loop on somebody else's cows.

In the grim satisfaction of his knowledge, his anger and resentment toward the Kid melted, and suddenly a cold cramp grabbed him. The Kid had stumbled onto this trail and had undoubtedly followed it on into camp. If they had harmed that Kid—Jed knew then that he liked the little devil, had liked him all the time but would not admit it.

"Rusty," he muttered as he remounted, "you better walk fast and careful!"

He did not turn into the trail but struck a course paralleling it, his eyes flitting to every rock that might afford cover; but he could not watch them all. Alert as he was, he was startled by the sudden wind that tugged at his shirt, followed immediately by the spiteful crack of a rifle.

Jed went off his horse backwards in a sprawling collapse that landed him in the inadequate shelter of a jumble of rocks, and he lay as he had fallen. However, in the convulsion of his fall he had drawn his gun, and it was now gripped tightly in the right hand that lay, apparently inert, in the shadow of a bush.

He listened intently for the sound of a departing horse, heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart. Had this happened to U-Bet, too? Damn fool! Jed was mad all over again—and gripped by a terrible fear. He, Jed Carson, had sent the Kid on this rebellious ride by cussing him out—over nothing! He wanted to leap up, shoot it out sixgun against rifle, get on down the trail! Only by the greatest effort of will could he make himself lie motionless and wait.

THE hot afternoon sun beat down, flies crawled across his forehead, the indifferent Rusty cropped grass with noisy satisfaction. Finally Jed heard the low sliding of rock, the cautious scraping of leather. Through slitted eyes he saw brown hair ease gently up from behind a rock, followed by a pair of cold blue eyes, then a hand holding a gun that was coming to bear.

Jed rolled sharply, felt gravel fly into his face as the fellow shot, sent his own shot by instinct. The brown head disappeared. Jed kept rolling until he was behind another rock and then peered out. A pair of boots protruded into view, the spud rowels still whirling. Jed sent a deliberate shot to graze the instep of one boot but it remained motionless.

Satisfied though he was, Jed did not abandon caution. Noiselessly he wormed his way forward, then arose with left hand on the rock to steady him, right hand holding the cocked gun. Slowly he leaned forward, his eyes traveling up the figure of the prone man until they came to rest on the blood-smeared face, a face with eyes open but unseeing.

For a moment Jed stood there while his breath all left at once. Then he wheeled to Rusty and rode out after the fellow's horse. It did not take him long to pay his obligations to a dead man he had never seen before.

Jed stripped the saddle from the horse and turned him loose. Then he covered the body with the saddle blankets, weighted the corners down with rocks, mounted Rusty and rode on.

"It's kinda late to mention it to that stranger," he commented to Rusty with hard sarcasm, "but if a man's gonna play for keeps, he better stick to fellers his own size—or smaller."

Jed did abandon part of his caution now in favor of speed. He kept to the crooked rocky trail since the traveling was better, pushing Rusty at every opportunity. His eyes were savagely alert, flicking from the broken skyline before him to the uneven trail below, constantly looking for the track of the little bay, Half Pint.

In spite of his efforts he could not make good time. Darkness found him with still a long way to go, but he kept on, trusting to Rusty's ability to follow a trail in the dark.

Reaching the last ridge north of Neal's

Canyon, he tied Rusty to a juniper, stripped off chaps and spurs, and proceeded on foot, sure now of what he would find. Half Pint's tracks had still been in the trail when daylight ended.

He angled up the ridge diagonally, topping out directly above the lower end of that natural corral, and grunted with satisfaction. A hundred and fifty yards below him on the floor of the canyon, a huge smooth rock dimly reflected the glow of a campfire.

Jed glanced anxiously toward the east. The moon would be up in another thirty minutes. While he could use its light to advantage in reaching the floor of the canyon, he did not care to have it reveal his approach. Taking a deep breath and once more touching the reassuring butt of his gun, he started down.

It was slow, tortuous going, step by cautious step to be sure no rocks rolled under his feet, curse by silent curse as he ran against the jagged edge of a rock or the sharp spine of a cactus.

He reached the floor of the canyon at a point above the towering rock that sheltered the fire just as the moon was rising and crossed the creek on rocks so that the rush of suddenly dammed water would not betray him. Just after he had crossed, the sharp clang of a shod hoof on rock sent him dropping down as if he'd been shot.

He marked the progress of the horse coming down the canyon for several moments before he discerned the outline of a rider. Something familiar about the set of that rider in the saddle stung Jed's attention; and when the fellow passed by in the moonlight not fifteen feet from where Jed was lying, he saw that it was his own cowpuncher, Dan. Jed knew then why Dan worked so much by himself and why no one ever stumbled onto cattle that were being stolen.

Dan swung around the jumbled rocks toward the fire while Jed climbed silently to the top of a flat boulder that over-

looked the camp but was out of the firelight.

A short stocky man in dirty overalls and slouch hat squatted just beyond the fire, hands turned to the blaze. Bed rolls, saddles, packs were strung around with abandon. On the near side of the fire, his back toward Jed, sat the Kid, his big hat pulled low over his face.

"Where's Hank?" Dan asked brusquely as he swung down and stamped to get the kinks out of his legs. The trail he had followed, directly over the mountain, was almost impassible.

"Went back up the trail away to stop Carson," the stocky man answered. "We figured he'd be on the trail of this dude."

"He's on it all right." Dan nodded with quick approval. "Left first thing this morning."

"Well, he won't get by Hank," the other growled, throwing a handful of twigs into the fire.

Dan turned to appraise the Kid.

"So the little Mister Smart Aleck U-Bet Howard stumbled onto our camp, did he?" he asked with a nasty grin. "Where in hell did you get that name, U-Bet, anyhow?"

"Cause I like to bet," the Kid snapped with unexpected spirit. "And I'll betcha right now that no *one* man will stop Jed Carson!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, sonny," Dan said grinning. "But if Carson stayed on your trail, and it's a cinch he did, then he's layin' back there right now with a rifle bullet through his heart. Hank oughta be back any minute."

The Kid's fists tightened convulsively in his lap, but there was no other evidence of the fear that gripped him.

JED, seeing that he could start no trouble as long as the Kid remained between him and the men, stretched out on the rock and waited, grinning to himself at the spunk this Kid was showing when the going got rough.

Dan squatted on his heels beside the fire, rolling a cigarette.

"What're you figgerin' on doin', White?" he asked.

"Well, I figger as soon as Hank gets back, we better pack up and light outa here. When Carson doesn't show up back at the ranch, the rest of the outfit'll come a-snoop-in'. Mebbe not tomorrer but next day shore."

Dan nodded his approval. "Cattle all worked?"

"All except those three you snaked over yesterday. Brands ain't healed, o' course, but if we can get 'em outa this canyon and across the valley 'fore daylight, I know a good place to hide 'em. And it'd take a damn good tracker to find 'em."

"Carson's the only one of the outfit that's really good at trailin'," Dan commented with unconcealed satisfaction. Then he glanced narrowly at the Kid. "What about him?"

"Take him along," White answered instantly. "If we don't get outa here slick, nobody'll do much shootin' as long as he's with us. Mebbe later we can get somethin' for him."

"He ain't worth much," Dan grinned sourly. Then he maliciously flipped his cigarette butt at the Kid's face.

As the Kid dodged, slipping sidewise off the log, his hat caught on the brush and hung there. For a moment he stood horrified as long bright hair came tumbling down about his shoulders to reveal him as a slim young girl.

That moment for Jed Carson was like no other he had ever experienced. A moment suspended somewhere out in eternity, having no connection with all the other millions of moments fleeting by. He was stunned, incapable of thought or movement. He heard Dan's "My Gawd! A gurl!" but it had no meaning for him.

Dan and White had leaped up simultaneously. As Dan started forward with a devilish grin on his hard face, the Kid darted

to the side of the fire, snatched up a chunk of firewood, and turned defiantly.

At that point Jed slid forward off the rock and in two long bounds reached the edge of the firelight.

"Dan!" he yelled stridently.

The Kid screamed. Dan, recognizing Jed's voice, threw himself behind a pack. White whirled, his gun coming up; and even as Jed's shot caught him in the chest, stopping him cold, Dan's first shot grazed the upper part of Jed's arm. Jed leaped aside, but the man was out of his sight, shooting from a crack. His second shot ripped Jed's hat from his head and spanged wickedly off the rock behind him.

Again Jed jumped, twisting, but he tripped and went down heavily on his right side. Instantly Dan bounded up, his gun coming to a level. Jed rolled, trying to get speed into his partially numbed gun arm, but he could see he wasn't going to be fast enough.

Then a chunk of dried mesquite sailed across the fire and caught Dan squarely on the point of the shoulder, sending his bullet wild. Before he could get the gun lined up again, Jed shot him.

Echoes slapped back and forth from the rocks furiously and then gave way to silence, suffocating silence, broken by the scamper of booted feet.

"Jed! Jed, are you all right? Where'd he hit you? Answer me. Oh, Jed!"

The uninjured Jed found himself on the bottom of a pile of twining arms and long fragrant hair and terrified brown eyes. He struggled to get up but his strength, somehow, was way below par and he couldn't make it.

"Oh, Jed, I'm so sorry." The Kid was sobbing now. "I'm a fool. A locoed, cross-grained fool. And—and—oh, gosh, I'm so scared!"

She sat down weakly beside him, her face in her hands, the sobs shaking her convulsively. Something was happening to

(Continued on page 114)

Next

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

Published

October 3rd

Greetings, pard. Here's an advance look-see at the George C. Appell novelette which will lead off the next issue. It's the punch-packed, swift-moving saga of a deputy named Vacklen, who brought a dead man into Pine Junction, which led to a strange two-way man-hunt, in which Vacklen himself was the quarry of an outlaw who—apparently—was immune alike to bullets or the hangnoose!



Vacklen had a warrant for the fugitive Buckshot Jones, but the townsmen were more interested in planting the half-legendary killer known as Malpais, once and for all. Trouble was, they'd hung Malpais once, and he'd lived to tell about it.



Now Malpais—or his evil spirit—was protecting the fugitive, Buckshot. Vacklen rode out alone into the badlands, and it took all of the deputy's courage to enter that eerie, sunless cave after Buckshot. . . .



It took real guts just to stay alive, when Buckshot Jones appeared suddenly, and started punching Vacklen's boothill ticket. To save his life, Vacklen then must hunt down the one man who knew whether Malpais was alive or dead. . . .

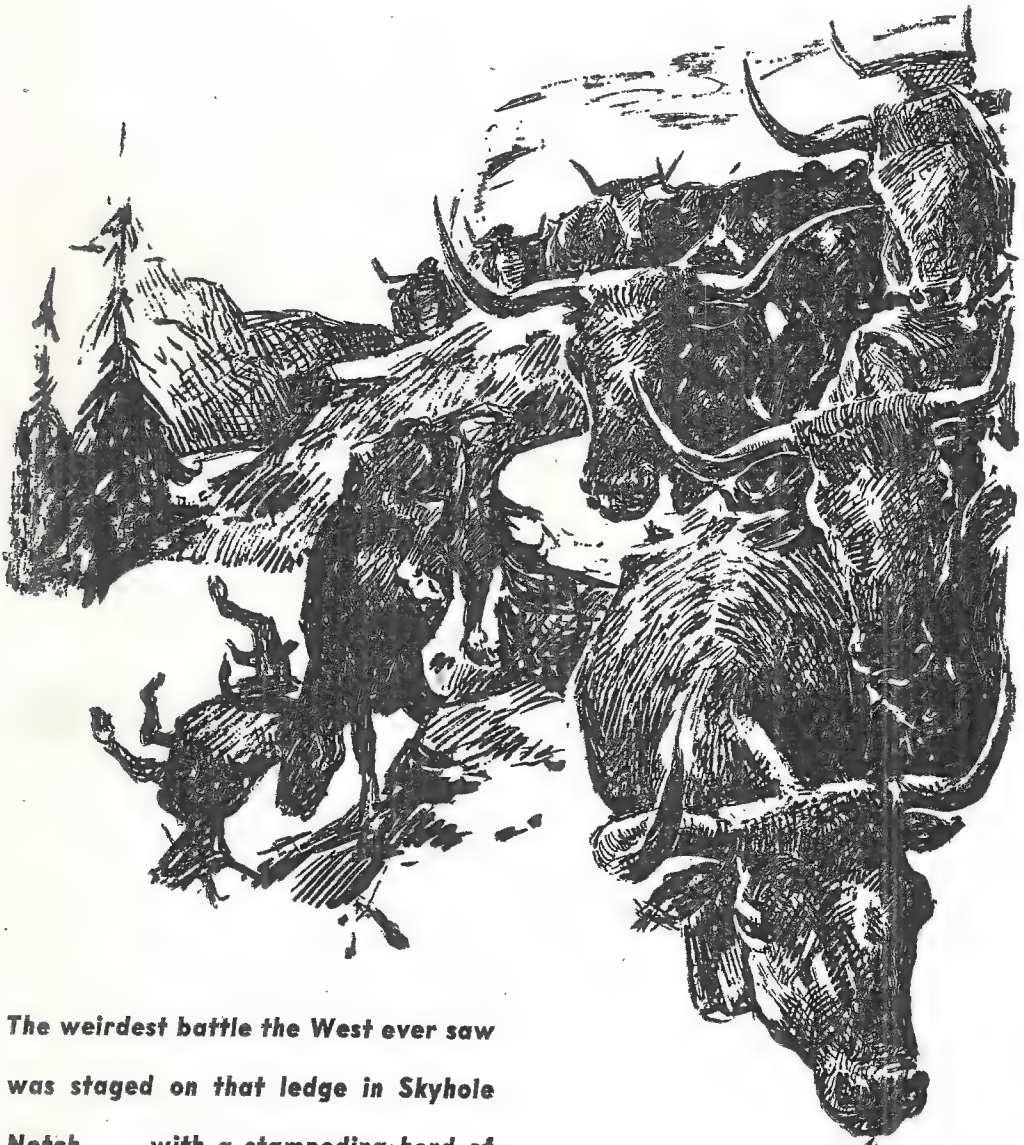


But someone else's guns had found the man first! Which threw Vacklen squarely into a final red-hot shoot-out with a shadowy figure that no bullet could kill! The complete story, "Malpais Gun-Chore," will be in the December issue.

SORONADO DEADLINE

Fast-Action Novelette of the Cow-Country

By DANE GREGORY



*The weirdest battle the West ever saw
was staged on that ledge in Skyhole
Notch . . . with a stampeding herd of
hell-on-the-hoof as both the prize—
and the weapon!*



"Fight!" he yelled. "Make noise, you Texas sons! They're stampeding your herd!"

THERE was going to be trouble. Reined in beside Jap Killene at the point where Skyhole Notch began to shelve down to the prairie floor, Breck Tarrant watched that trouble shape itself progressively against the early light.

He could trace its growth by the silver dust fan that swung eastward down the

toe of Soronada county, gathering size and clarity until individual riders sorted themselves out of the cavalcade. The sun struck a quick, hot shimmer from unbooted carbines, so that the silver fan was suddenly jeweled with light.

It merged with the restless dust beaten up by the McFarlane trail herd, a thou-

sand or so honed-down critters held in the narrow funnel-neck where Soronada County pitched upward into the Notch. Watching all this with deep interest, Jap Killene lounged over his saddle horn and began to talk in his softly ingratiating way.

"Be a bad place for a stampede, Breck." He sliced one hand at the rowdy yellow river below, roistering down from the table country behind them. "Ain't it too bad the McFarlanes couldn't have got their herd cross-line into this county before they tangled with Crimmins? That ain't any bunch of cow-pirates, you know—it's Sheriff Pat Crimmins headin' a Soronada County posse."

Breck hipped around. He cut one hard gray glance at the Halved Circle owner, wondering if there had been a certain sly relish in the words. "I was some surprised to find you up here having yourself a look this early in the morning, Killene. What's your interest in the McFarlane herd?" he asked bluntly.

It was not the way a banker should talk to one of his heavy depositors, but he could never quite conceal his dislike of this man.

Negative and self-effacing in a country where character was usually defined in bold, clear lines, Killene's very lack of color seemed to serve as a kind of protective coloration—the mask for a shrewd and intricate mind.

He talked hard times, but no rancher in Hastings county stood on firmer financial ground. He had the meeching friendliness of a stray pup, but no other rancher thought it necessary to hire so many gunhands. The man was a human evasion, a question-mark on legs.

Now his pale eyes sidled to Breck, a vague hurt in them. "Ain't I a cowman? Natche'ly I take an interest in the kind of herds that come up into the Table country, 'specially with so much tick fever down Texas way."

He smiled slowly and added: "You got any personal interest in that herd, Breck? There's a rumor that old Bill and his gal Medley are kind of down on you for refusing 'em a loan."

Breck's cheeks flattened. "Since the herd'll have to cross my spread to get into Hastings county, Jap, looks like I've got good reasons for being interested. And

anyhow, I'm a banker." He tasted the word, not liking it. "Case you don't know, Jap, that means everybody's business and everybody's troubles are mine. And everybody's hate. If the range is overstocked, I'm damned for loaning out the money that overstocked it—and if I quit loaning out money, I'm damned for that."

"I take it you didn't finance the McFarlane herd then?"

"You can take it that way."

"No offense," Killene wheedled. "Well, it looks like maybe they've cut themselves into a stand of trouble, now, don't it?"

IT DID look that way. Carbines still in hand, the two horsemen in the van had alighted and were palavering with old Bill McFarlane.

Medley McFarlane came to her father's side and stood there facing the issue with him, her uncovered head as bright as a tanager's breast in the sun. She wore dusty range gear relieved only by the slash of orange at her throat, but this girl's beauty was deep and electrifying.

"Gonna get yourself mixed up in it, Breck?" Jap Killene said.

He shrugged the question away and headed downslope with the Halved Circle man at his heels.

"Got 'em in Southern Arizona, Crimmins," Bill McFarlane was saying. He nodded to Breck and Killene, his eyes harassed. "What's wrong with that?"

Sallow and grim, the Soronada County sheriff pushed closer at the side of his deputy. "There's nothing wrong with it—if you can prove it. Looks funny, though, the way you tried to ram your herd through so quiet, when you know we got a fever quarantine here. We'd like to see your bill of sale, McFarlane, just to make sure."

Behind Crimmins, the massed possemen waited in a stiff, unbending silence—ranchers who knew that a few scattered ticks could despoil their range like a blight. Old Bill slapped ineffectually at the pockets of his brush-jacket and looked down into his daughter's eyes. She spoke for him, standing straight and defiant.

"Dad told you once that he mislaid the bill of sale. But even if it was a Texas herd, we've got it through your borders and what can you do about it now?"

The sheriff's eyes went flat and still. "We

wouldn't impound 'em, miss. We'd just stampede 'em into Rattlesnake Gorge—hoof, hide and tallow!"

The trail hands bunched closer with a quick and purposeful accord, their movements only a faint rustling in the quiet. Carbine triggers clicked like snapping teeth as the possemen deployed into a loose formation around Crimmins.

Then Bill McFarlane had his say:

"You see how it is, Sheriff. We're not inviting trouble with Soronada County law, but we'll bet every cap in our guns that the herd don't wind up in the Gorge!"

For a held breath the situation stayed at full-cock, wanting only a reckless word or movement to set it off in smoke. Then Crimmins swung astride his mount.

He said evenly, "We're liable to cover that bet a little later, McFarlane. I'll give you just twenty-four hours to get your critters out of this county and into your own. If they're here one minute after the deadline, we'll push you and the herd to hell. All right, boys—let's ride."

ONE of the trail-hands laughed softly and spoke to another, running the words together in a musical drawl. "Looks like we've missed our only chance to bag us a sheriff, hey, Tex?"

Tex...

Breck ground-reined the buckskin and moved slowly toward Bill McFarlane, Killene's inescapable shadow blending with his. Medley McFarlane looked at him without warmth, and he thought tiredly that it was his peculiar destiny to raise walls between himself and this girl.

He said, "I reckon I'll have to look over your herd before you push it onto my range, Bill."

In seconds, McFarlane's seamy face took on years. "All right, Breck. Though I wouldn't call it neighborly."

Riders swung in endless circles around the restive cattle as Breck's glance reached into that seething wilderness of beef and singled out a critter that stood on the fringe, its head low and its slat-sided body braced on teetersnipe legs. He said, "I'm not doing this because I like it, Bill, but I've got to perform a post-mortem on that cull."

"All right," McFarlane said dully.

He cut out the lethargic steer and hazed

it to a point near the smouldering wagon fire. One blow of an ax-head felled the critter like a shot from a needle-gun, and Breck took the proffered skinning knife and went to work. A quick breath rattled in Jap Killene's throat as he turned out the inflamed stomach lining.

"Dry season," old Bill McFarlane explained heavily. "Roots come up with the grass and sand with the roots—and sand-paunched steers is the result. Damn it, Breck, this ain't any fever herd!"

Probably he was right. There were no ticks along the steer's neck; none hiding in the crannies of the feet; none in the gotched ears. But it didn't matter.

He straightened slowly, and his eyes struck deep into old Bill McFarlane's. "I'd know a Tejano anywhere in the world, Bill—even if he wasn't named Tex. It's a Texas crew and a Texas herd." His lips tightened as he said, "That's why you mislaid your bill of sale."

Silence molded itself around them so that they were isolated from the noise of the herd and the sounds of men shifting position nearby. There was a gray defeat under old Bill's tan. "I'm not a good liar, Breck. I bought a Texas herd because I had a chance to buy it cheap. A man takes some long gambles when he's using dimes for dollars."

"Seems like Redwater Fever is a poor thing to gamble on, Bill," Jap Killene interposed softly.

"There's no fever in that herd! Jap, do you think I'm the kind of cow-country Judas that'd carry ticks onto his home range? And you, Tarrant—I'm asking you the same question!"

"A man don't always know when he's scattering ticks, Bill."

"I know, I tell you! I've been a cowman all my life, and I—" The fire died out of McFarlane's eyes, leaving only its gray ash behind. "Have your say, Tarrant. I bought that herd with cash borrowed from my brother back East. And you can ruin him and me at one lick!"

"You've heard what Crimmins said. You know I've got to cross your land t'other side of the Notch, or see my beef choused into that gorge—which'd mean that a lot of good men would die backing a bust hand. I'm right in the middle of a two-way squeeze if you say the wrong word,

Tarrant. I reckon it's up to you—now."

They were waiting for him to make his choice: old Bill, Medley McFarlane, the stiff and hostile trail crew. And Jap Killene, watching him slyly from pale eyes.

It was as sorry a choice as a man had ever had to make, for he knew that either alternative was a betrayal. Just as he knew that the decision had been in his mind from the first, that there could be no compromise.

He looked up at the sky, brassy and cloudless. "I'm sorry, Bill. A rain would kill the danger of fever, but there's not much chance of it soon enough."

McFARLANE'S shoulder's slumped.

"If I was just only a rancher," Breck said, "I'd tell you to take your herd across. But my dad left me a bank as well as a couple of brands, and I can't take a step that might mean I was selling out men who've trusted their money with me. I just can't do 'er, Bill."

It was then that Medley McFarlane came between them, her eyes wide and hot. "You can't stop us! There aren't any restrictions in Hastings County yet!"

It was Jap Killene who answered. "But there would be, Miss Medley, long before you got your cattle through. In some places that ledge ain't more'n twenty feet wide, and two men up above could turn the whole herd into the gorge. Yes, ma'am, news gets around mighty fast."

"I see," Medley McFarlane said quietly. But her eyes turned, flashing darkly on Tarrant's again, hating him. "So you've made up your mind to break us, have you? When we came to you for a loan—"

"I was turning everybody down, Medley. It's a banker's business to tighten up when he knows a range is being overgrazed."

"All right . . . banker!" the girl said tonelessly. "We weren't asking for charity then, and we're not asking for it now!"

The words—and the girl's tone—drove Breck around like a blow and sent him back toward the buckskin, his face stiffened against any show of emotion. But within him there was a hard and hopeless fury.

One of the trail hands had slouched into his path and stopped there deliberately, slanting an upward glance.

"I never liked bankers," the man assured him. "They smell of other men's sweat."

Breck said, "Move."

The other shifted into a half-crouch and hooked his thumbs over the buckles of his low-hung belt. Breck read the thing in his eyes. He knew him at once for one of those migrant killers who sometimes find their way into the best of crews. And he was ready to kill now, urged less by loyalty than by a need that only killing could appease.

Breck said, "Move."

There was a pause like a hole in time. Then Medley McFarlane said, "No, Creel! No!" and the gunman's glance cut sideways, hot and rebellious.

Breck moved in fast. He caught the man's wrist and threw it upward and back with a force that snapped the gun from slack fingers.

He hit Creel once on the point of the chin, putting the whole lean drive of his body into the blow, and the gunman walked backwards and heeled over in a crooked sprawl near the wagon fire. He lay there bloody and motionless.

Medley McFarlane said through the silence, "I—I don't think he'd have—"

"He'd have shot me, all right," Breck said flatly. "It's none of my business, but I'd give that gent his time if I were you."

He swung into the saddle and pointed the buckskin upgrade toward the Notch, hearing the clatter of Jap Killene's sorrel hard behind.

Killene was smiling faintly as he drew abreast. It was the smile of a man whose thoughts were pleasant ones.

CHAPTER

2

The Bank-Buster

Breck Tarrant sat in his cubbyhole office that afternoon and waited helplessly for the situation to break open. For it would break, all right. He had already accepted that as the inevitable consequence of his action.

With imminent ruin facing them, the McFarlanes would fight stubbornly for what they believed a moral right: the right to push their Texas-bought herd into country that had no fever restrictions. And with Jap Killene sidling here and there to spread the story of what had happened, the Table

country would fight as stubbornly to keep that herd out. It was an issue that had in it all the ingredients of tragedy, and those ingredients would come to a boil as the deadline hour drew nearer.

A two-way squeeze for the McFarlanes. Well, it had been that for him, too. His obligation to the bank—and his neighbors, who'd be wrecked if the bank went down, on one side—and his love for Medley McFarlane on the other. Those two opposed forces had pinched him real tight when old Bill McFarlane came to him for a loan, hoping to revive his impoverished spread by a desperate gamble in new beef.

As a friend, he'd gladly have turned out his own pockets for McFarlane. But last fall's ruinous roundup prices had left them empty. As a banker, he had had to put larger considerations ahead of friendship—ahead of everything else in the world.

"To hell," Breck said aloud, "with being a banker!"

He crossed the tight square of his office, hot as a dutch oven this time of day, and looked out into the afternoon sunlight that splintered painfully against Mesa Center's pine false fronts.

Dust dreamed on that still air, quickening to lazy life as hoofs *clip-clopped* and buggy wheels rimmed their way into the familiar ruts. Downstreet a girl's bright hair borrowed fire from the sun, and Breck saw that it was Medley McFarlane talking earnestly to two men.

Upstreet other men bunched together in small, garrulous knots; and over there, across from the bank building, two more were just now breaking company in the shadow of an alley wall. He noted thoughtfully that they were Jap Killene and the hardcase killer known as Creel.

The trouble was shaping up. From where he stood the pattern was not yet clear or comprehensive, but the slow stir and boil of the town had unmistakable implications.

He swung from the window and started for the bank door.

The panel leaned inward to meet him, and Chet Laybaugh came heavy-footed into the room, rolling his hat-brim between immense square fingertips as he shuffled forward.

"Breck," he said, "I—"

"What's wrong, Chet? Sit down."

Laybaugh folded into a chair, and looked

up at him out of sun-puckered eyes. "Breck," he said slowly, "I knew your daddy when he was running this here institution, and I reckon you're cut out of the same piece of goods. I know you been stretching your dollars seventeen ways at once to help the little outfits—and some of the big ones, too, when they ran short of feed over dry stretches. . . ."

He hesitated, then began again. "Now some folks are blaming you on account the range is overgrazed, saying you should have froze up your capital long time before. But I ain't blaming any banker for having a heart bigger'n a soybean."

He slapped the hard weight against his thigh. "Thing I'm trying to tell you, Breck: I aim to back yore play from hell to breakfast! You need any help to keep the depositors off, I'm right here handy."

Breck stiffened to a sharp alertness. "The depositors?"

"Why, yeah." Laybaugh cocked one shaggy brow. "I thought you knowed, son. There's gonna be a run on this bank. It's startin'—right now."

BRECK sat down and looked long and hard into his eyes. "If that's true, Chet," he said flatly, "it'll break the bank forty ways from the deuce spot! I've put every spare cent out on long-term mortgages. But why the hell *should* it be true?"

"Talk," said Laybaugh. "They're sayin' your bank financed the McFarlane trail-herd down there in the Soronada bottleneck. I tell 'em it's a lie, but they're rememberin' how you used to squire Medley McFarlane around to dances and spend yore spare time lookin' into her eyes. And, Breck, they just ain't believin' you didn't back old Bill!"

"They figure you'd've let that Texas herd into the county, if Jap Killene hadn't been there watchin' you. And they say—well, they say that now you've sunk a lot of capital on a busted flush. When Crimmins chouses that herd into the gorge, they figure the bank'll go with it."

Breck's eyes were narrowed. "Who's saying it, Chet?"

"Be easier to tell you who *ain't* sayin' it—which adds up to mighty few people. It's one of them yarns that just sort of passes from man to man along the tincan telegraph. I wouldn't know who started it,

Breck, but . . ." Laybaugh rang the brass cuspidor . . . "did you ever stop to think that Jap Killene gets a lot of things said—for a man that don't say much?"

Killene. . . .

Breck turned that servile, narrow face in his mind and knew instinctively that Laybaugh was right. It would be Killene who was doing this, rustling the leaves like a sly wind, stealthily building up the contagious terror that could wreck any bank, however sound, in a matter of hours. And the purpose would lie deeper than simple malice, for Killene let practical motives guide him always. He was that most dangerous of animals: a cougar walking in a coyote's skin.

Breck said through the hot rise of his hate, "Is he saying much about tick fever, Chet?"

"Enough. Wants it kept out of the country at any cost, he says, on account he's got a trail herd of his own comin' up from the north right away now."

Breck tipped forward in his chair. "A herd of his own?" His brow puckered. "That's news to me."

"To everybody else, I reckon, because it's other people's business he usually talks about. So he's posted a dozen of his toughest hands at the Notch to see that the McFarlanes don't run a blaze. They'll be ready to jump down the sacks and stampede a thousand critters into the gorge below. I don't like any of this, son. You done what you had to do as a banker, but Bill McFarlane knows the difference between a sand-paunched critter and a fevered one."

Pale and haunted, old Ambrose the cashier tottered in, his enormous glasses slipping half down his skinny nose. "Breck!" he said huskily. "The depositors! They're—they're—"

Breck came tiredly to his feet. "I know, Amby. Get back behind your wicket. I'll do what I can."

"And I'll be right there sidin' you, son." Laybaugh looked affectionately at the shining length of gun in his hand. "The first jughead that insists on his money . . ."

"No," said Breck, striking the desktop softly with his palm.

"What say?"

"Thanks a lot, Chet, but I reckon we can't handle it that way. They've got a legal right to their money, and you can't

kill a man just for being a damn fool."

Laybaugh said bleakly, "When did they pass *that* law?"

IT WAS Breck Tarrant's first experience with the hysteria that can sweep men along in a confused rout like cattle panicked by St. Elmo's fire.

He looked at those pale, frantic faces and could almost see the terror crackling from man to man, eerie as the run of cold light across-massed horn-tips. He braced himself close to old Ambrose's cage and tried to turn back the leaders, dealing out words until they dried up in his throat. But all the while Breck knew that he was talking against a single and unseen element rather than a group of men.

"We don't want your speeches," somebody bawled. "We want our money, and we're gonna get it!"

"You'll get your money!" Breck said through his teeth. "Every cent of it. Amby's paying off as fast as he can."

He knew that he had lost.

If these had been ranchers he could have handled them, for he spoke their language and he had their respect. He had carried them over the thin times and established a ground-work of mutual trust that would have given him solid footing now.

But these were the merchants and professional men of Mesa Center, and Breck realized suddenly that he was a stranger to them. That they were strangers to him, living in a tight little world of facts and figures from which his own temperament excluded him.

He was not the banker his father had been, able to talk stock with the ranchers, and stockpiles with the businessmen. Actually, he was no kind of banker at all. He was a rancher pinned to a swivel chair, and all these months there had been a honing in him for open range.

He said, "All right, boys. You're break-in' your only bank, and it's nice to be able to tell you I don't give a damn if you break yourselves along with it! The only thing I care about is the other fellows, the ranchers. They need a bank, and when this thing gets around, they'll gun-whip the bunch of you!"

A shoulder thrust him aside. Those repeated withdrawals had fed the hysteria of the men in back, driving them forward so

that the crowd broke against itself and men piled up like drift-logs against the teller's cage.

"Breck!" old Amby called dismally through the wicket. "What shall I do? Shall I—"

"Keep paying out!" Breck shouted hoarsely.

He was looking for Jap Killene. The only rancher in Hastings county with a sizeable bank balance—twenty thousand dollars—Killene would logically have been the first man at the wicket.

But that starved face was nowhere in sight. Incredibly, it came to Breck that Killene's twenty thousand was absorbing the full shock of the bank run.

It was a fact that would jigsaw with neither Laybaugh's notion nor his own. Only Killene, his instincts assured him, had a mind capable of conceiving and executing this thing. Yet, strangely, Killene himself was being stripped to the hide by it.

"Breck!" old Amby wailed. "They're ruinin'—"

"Keep paying out!" Breck said mechanically.

Old Amby kept paying out. . . .

BRECK'S father had used up twenty years building the Mesa Center Bank. Into that task he had poured the hopes of his heart, the profits of his two spreads, and the immense fullness of his vitality. And now, in less than twenty minutes, greed and panic had had their cyclonic way with old Thad Tarrant's dream.

Thinking of this, Breck knew all the deep, sick bitterness of one who has seen a monument overturned.

Shrunkened and lost, old Ambrose followed Breck back to his office. He wiped his glasses and shook a whisper out of trembling lips. "There—there's nothing left for me now, I guess. I was a part of this place, and the place was a part of me."

"You'll be a part of it again," Breck told him gently. "A range can't get along without a bank, and the ranchers'll see to it there's one here. Only, I'm going to take care of my two outfits. And let a smarter man run the next one."

Tears made a quick shine in the old man's eyes. "You ran this one the way your old dad would have wanted you to,

Breck. You ran it for the whole county instead of yourself. I think your dad would've been mighty—"

The door opened and Jap Killene came softly into the room.

Breck got up.

Killene put his shoulders against the wall and dipped his head toward Breck so that his pale glance tilted obliquely from the shade of sandy brows. He was smiling his frugal smile, only a dab of wet shadow at either lip corner, but Breck rummaged behind that smile and knew that Killene was laughing inside.

Something quick and wild struck then along his nerve ends, tightening him up so that the muscles ridged in his arms and throat.

He said in a tight voice, "What do you want, Jap?"

Killene said, "They tell me you been havin' a little trouble here, Breck. Natche'ly I was sorry to hear it, but I reckon a man can't rightly be blamed for wantin' to protect his own interests. Guess I'll have to trouble you for that twenty thousand I got on deposit."

Breck said, "I'm still waiting to hear what you want, Jap. You lost your twenty thousand in the run, and it was a run you started. That don't make very good sense—but neither do you."

Killene's feet moved softly. "Now, Breck," he chided. "What's all this about *me* startin' the run? Came to a court o' law, you know that'd be an almighty hard thing to back up." The pale lips bent in their blurred, meaningless grin. "But I ain't a troublemaker. I ain't a hard man nor a vengeful one. All I'm wantin' is my legal rights."

"Go on," said Breck.

"Ever read the state bankin' laws? I been readin' up on 'em a little lately, and it seems like you ain't exactly run this institution accordin' to Hoyle, Breck. Take your loans, for instance: you've put out lots of money on no-account security, or maybe just another man's personal promise to pay up. Well, that ain't nowise legal, Breck. If I was a hard man, I could make you some bad court-trouble about my twenty thousand dollars."

Old Ambrose crumpled raglike into a chair. "Wait, Breck! He—he's right. He—"

TWO deep pale lines cut down from Breck's nostrils and there was a fierce restraint in the stiff set of his body. He said without emphasis, "Go on, Killene."

"But like I say, I don't want nothin' more than my rights." Killene's glance licked upward in its shy, placating way. "I'll write off eight thousand of that twenty for a deed to your Doubletree spread and its stock. And another eight thousand for the Pine Tree outfit . . . A busted bank ain't worth four thousand, Breck, but I don't aim to drive a hard bargain. I'll take over this here institution for the rest of what you owe me."

"It's blackmail, Breck," old Amby whispered. "Those ranches are worth five times—"

Breck said, "I reckon you'll give me a little time to study on your proposition?"

Killene assured him that he wouldn't want to crowd anybody. "You think it over, Breck, and let me know tomorrow. I'd hate to make court-trouble for you."

"All right," said Breck. "And you can have this while I'm thinking it over."

He moved in, and drove a long, looping right to Killene's jaw that threw him backward into the wall. Killene rocked there on wide-set heels and thumped the plaster-board with his shoulders.

Breck caught him by the collar and held him up upright against the wall and felt Killene's mouth break and spread under the solid ram of his knuckles.

He said urgently, "Fight, Jap! *Fight!*"

A pale hate flared in Killene's eyes, but his body was limp and yielding. Breck's open palm pitched him sideways with the noise of an oar hitting water.

"You carry a gun, Jap. Mine's in my desk. Draw on me, damn you! I want to kill you with your own gun."

The torn lips parted on an edge of teeth. "I'll wait a spell, Breck. I'm a business man, and I wouldn't care to fight you now."

"Fight!" said Breck. "Fight back, Killene! Fight! *Fight!*"

The hard joy faded out of him and left a sickness and a loathing where it had been. Flesh and cartilage gave under his fists, but Killene's pale eyes held to their resolve. He sagged down onto his knees and waited there, looking up at Breck in a hangdog way.

It was like fighting wind or shadow;

like tearing at the stuff of clouds. Nothing opposed you but the thing in yourself that would not let you go on.

Breck said, "Open the side door, Ambrose."

Ambrose opened the side door, and Breck carried Jap Killene over there and threw him out into the powdery dust of the street.

Old Amby shook his head. "I—I wish you hadn't done that, Breck. Jap ain't soft: he's as dangerous as a curly wolf. Maybe a little crazy, even. And he can ruin you . . . cut you down to the grass roots, son."

Breck took out his cartridge belt and cinched it around flat hips. "He's going to ruin me anyhow, Amby. A cattleman's bank can't be run like others, but I'd have a hard time selling that to a judge. Yep, it looks like I'll be riding grub-line this winter."

Old Amby worriedly watched him test the slide of the Colt. "Now listen, Breck. You're not going to get in any trouble, are you?"

"There are things I can do as a man," Breck said, "that I couldn't do as a banker. Just for instance, now, I can back another man's cow-savvy to the limit—yeah, and sleep like a baby after it's done."

"You mean. . . ?"

Breck gave him a lean, reckless grin. "There may be a little trouble with Killene's men, but the McFarlane trail herd is coming through the Notch!"

CHAPTER

Bushwhack Bullets

3

The afternoon had vanished along with the Mesa Center bank when Breck Tarrant went out into the street. The westerly sun heeled over behind fat, sooty clouds piled against the skyline, and on the air there was the dim, cool promise of dusk.

Breck came to a sudden stop and watched Medley McFarlane move down-street toward him, her uncovered hair the one bright thing in the gray world.

"Breck!" she said. "Breck! They're saying . . . Is it true that—"

"That I'm a banker fresh out of banks? It's true enough, Medley."

She was very quiet for a moment, not looking at him. "Women aren't ever quite as reasonable as men," she said slowly, "especially when there's a question of"

loyalties involved. But I—I guess I've known from the first you were doing what you had to do. I think dad knows that, too." Her eyes steadied on his. "We've been too busy with our own troubles to know about yours. Why didn't you send for us, Breck? Surely you knew we'd have denied that the bank—"

He shook his head. "Don't you see how that would have looked to them? They were already saying that I financed the herd because I was in love with you." A wry humor pulled down at his lips. "That was the only true part of the story. Funny thing, now that I'm a pauper I've got courage enough to tell you!"

"I—I reckon I knew that, too." She touched his hand in a small, soft gesture that drew the moment tight and breathless around them. "You mean you lost everything because of us?"

"Not everything, maybe," he said through a faint smile, and kept on looking down at her. "Medley, I just want to know one thing. Are you dead sure there's no fever in your herd?"

A trace of the old anger touched her mouth, and then was gone. "The McFarlanes have never brought trouble to a range yet, Breck," she said levelly. "Dad bought those cattle in high country, too high for a tick belt. Why?"

"It wouldn't be good enough for a banker," said Breck, "but it's good enough for a man. I'm opening my Pine Tree range to your cattle tonight after they're through the Notch. And just to make sure we're not hurting the country, we'll burn a wide grass trail behind 'em. Jap Killene won't like that, I reckon, but he don't own the Pine Tree . . . yet!"

Her smile held a warmth and a gentleness he had never thought to see again. She said, "Thanks, Breck. That was what I should have had sense enough to admit to myself, that a man might want to do something a banker couldn't. . . . But it's going to mean a fight. Jap Killene has the law on his side now."

HE STARED at her. "The law?"
"Yes. Dad and I have been trying to get a little support from the other ranchers, but it's no use. The ones that agree with us aren't willing to fight for us—and I don't much blame them. It's not their trouble."

Her lips tightened. "The commissioner refused to pass a blanket quarantine against Texas herds, and so Killene went to Sheriff Mehan. Mehan wanted to stay out of the trouble personally, but he's worried about fever getting into his own little two-bit spread on the south mesa. So he deputized Killene and his men and gave them full authority to keep all fever herds out of the county."

"Well, you know what that means. There'll be a dozen killers waiting in the Notch tonight, and they'll see to it ours is called a fever herd." Fiercely she added, "It—it's rotten!"

It was all of that, Breck agreed. "But this county is pretty sick of Mehan's ways, and if it comes to a showdown there won't be many who'll back up the kind of law that deputizes gun-slicks." He searched into her eyes. "I reckon maybe you and your dad had something drastic in mind."

"Something almost hopeless," Medley McFarlane said. "I'm supposed to ride out now and tell the boys to get ready for the drive. Dad and Creel are in town, and when it's dark enough they're going to jump Killene's gunmen from this side of the Notch. If they're lucky, maybe they can handle the bunch without any killings, but—well, it'll be only two men against a dozen!"

A memory came to life in Breck's mind, turning his eyes narrow and still. "And one of those two will be Creel. I've known his kind before."

"He ramrodded the drive for us clear from Texas, and he knows how to use a gun."

"Yeah," Breck said dourly. "Is it safe for you to ride back through the Notch alone?"

"Yes. Killene's men are trying to act like deputy sheriffs, and there won't be any real trouble until tonight."

• "I'm going to hunt up your dad," said Breck, "and maybe even the faithful Creel. We'll be out there on schedule, and there'll be five-six of my Doubletree men with us. Aside from that, the plan won't be any different. Tell your crew we'll take care of Killene's quarantine squad."

"Breck," said Medley McFarlane, and took two quick steps toward him. "Breck . . . You—you don't have to do this, you know. It really isn't your fight."

Breck swung aground. He dropped the reins there, dallying the buckskin in a tangle of sage, and pushed forward on legs as uncertain as a colt's. The slope sheered away into a steeper descent, stair-stepped by ragged outcroppings of rock.

Breck followed that nightmarish stairway to the floor of the Notch, and there was no more sweat in his body when he stood at last on solid ground.

It was one of those narrow points in the ledge where Killene's men would be most likely to make their stand. Not twenty feet to Breck's left the trail broke on emptiness, a black void that swept down and away to the cutbanks where the Rattlesnake River brawled drunkenly toward Soronada county. But Breck heard no voices, no scabble of feet on the rock of the trail. Hugging the steep wall to his right, he edged on toward the Soronada bottleneck.

Afterwards, he could not remember what had happened—whether it had been an unseen rock, or a jog in the ledge, or his own lagging strength that betrayed him. He did not even know just when it happened.

Empty of everything but pain, he sprawled face down in the middle of the trail and listened with utter detachment to the sounds that now rode the darkness: herd-sounds, borne up to him from the lower reaches of the Notch. Driven cattle mumbling in their worried, protesting, after-dark way.

The McFarlane trail herd!

CHAPTER

4

Two-Way Stampede

The thought beat at last through the fog in his mind. This was it, the unforeseen thing that did not fit with anything that had gone before. The cattle were to have been held down there in the bed-grounds until Killene's men had been taken care of!

And there came to Breck a sudden live awareness of his predicament. He knew by those fretful sounds from below that the herd was already edged with panic.

The critters were feeling their way delicately along the fanged trail, and not liking any of this a bit. A single abrupt movement or unexpected obstacle might be enough to turn the herd back on itself in a holocaust that would sweep cattle and men alike into the deep gorge.

Breck began to crawl, dredging his body for strength. There would be no safety on the rim of the ledge; not with a thousand critters headed uptrail. But his searching fingers found a rocky shelf in the slope to his right, and below it a smaller jut of rock that gave him footing.

Dead beat, Breck flattened his shoulders against the slope, and waited there on the meagre overhang.

Dust particles stung the air, raised by the approaching herd. A horse's hoofs made sharp, flinty sounds below, and horse and rider sifted past like some vague colossus. Breck's lips had parted for a call when matchlight whipped backward from the man's cupped palms. It was Creel, the Texas killer!

Breck lifted the .44 and took careful aim. Then, abruptly he stopped, his finger slack on the trigger. The picture shaped itself intuitively in his mind.

Creel had authorized this drive, probably assuring Medley that Breck and her father had eased Killene's men off-trail and were holding them somewhere at gunpoint. Along this way a trap had been set—a death-trap, like as not—and Creel was leading the herd, the crew and the girl into it.

A bullet would stop him. But the cattle were near, and Breck knew that the magnified echoes of gunfire would spook them into churning destruction. Sick with frustration, he watched Creel fade around a bend in the Notch.

And the cattle came on. . . .

They seemed to drift on forever. Moaning, mincing, picking their way like mountain-goats along narrows where there was not space enough for them to move five abreast. And there were no swing riders to guide them, for it would have been death to tackle that trail on the flanks of a herd. A thousand horned heads moving eastward in one vast, reptilian undulation that would shatter like a glass-snake if a man so much as breathed hard.

Breck swayed on the shelf, choked with dust and despair. Never had he had a nightmare comparable to this reality. Only a warning in time could level the odds; yet between him and the drag riders—and Medley McFarlane—were cattle, cattle, cattle. He could not warn them. He could only wait helplessly.

Above him, sudden sounds told him what

SORONADO DEADLINE

that conclusion was to be. Horse-backers, somewhere far upslope were lazing east toward the Hastings County funnel of the Notch, and the night air brought their voices clearly.

KILLENE was saying: "I reckon it's about time to join Creel. Looks like the cattle are comin' through pretty fast, and there shouldn't be more'n two-three hundred of 'em left in the Notch by the time we get down there to the openin'. That'll be enough to turn the trick. Cut into the heel of the herd, boys, and cut in hard."

Another voice: "Ain't we liable to stampede the rest of 'em, too?"

"It don't matter," Killene said. "They'll scatter out on Pine Tree range, and the way it looks now the Pine Tree'll be mine before a man can spit. We'll have plenty good chances to round 'em up."

A third voice said fretfully: "I don't much like it, Jap. The McFarlane girl is back there with the drag riders, and she'll go down with the crew."

A plaintive regret shaded Jap Killene's voice. "It ain't my way of doin' things, either; but there's a sayin' down in the Pecos country that when women put on a cowboy's pants they're likewise takin' a cowboy's chance. It wasn't my wish, Bert, that the girl get herself mixed up in this. It won't exactly be killin', anyhow, not the way I look at it. The critters'll take care of the killin'."

Distance blanketed the voices to a low burr that at last faded altogether. But they left behind them implications that beat in the air like a fever pulse.

The critters would do the killing. . . .

Breck weighed that thought, and saw for the first time the magnitude and the ruthlessness of Jap Killene's plan.

Creel and his bunch would strike at the easterly door of the Notch, cutting into the herd and sending the last two hundred cattle backward in a frenzied rout that would clear the ledge of all living witnesses.

Bodies of drag riders and of cattle would spill down into the gorge below—enough cattle so that the strewn carcasses would convey the impression Jap Killene wanted conveyed. That there had been a general stampede over the ledge and the entire Mc-

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Farlane trail herd, as well as the riders, had been swept away by the boiling yellow river.

Killene would be sorry about the stampede, of course—as pathetically mournful as a pup that has forgotten he's housebroken. But if too many questions were raised, he could point out that his men had legal authority to turn the cattle; or—what was more likely—he could disown any connection with the tragedy whatever.

And in the meantime Jap Killene would be establishing ownership to a fortune in live beef. After a week or ten days work with hot irons and wet burlap up on the mesa rim, the stolen herd would be driven in from the north as Killene cattle. This, then, was the simon-pure trail herd that had prompted Jap Killene to take such a forthright stand against the threat of Texas fever. . . .

Somewhere down-trail a bronc lifted his neigh above the herd's sullen murmur, marking the position of the remuda or one of the drag riders. The cattle were thinning out, and that meant that in a matter of seconds the jaws of the death-trap would close.

And there was absolutely nothing, Breck Tarrant realized, that a man could do about it!

Between that thought and the click of the trap there was a strange, unreal instant in which his body seemed to move without any conscious command from his mind. Even now, he had no clear knowledge of what he was going to do; yet the wooden grip of the .44 was against his palm when he heard the shots.

Merging with the whoops of Killene's renegades, that sudden blast of gun-fire broke back from the Notch mouth and rolled down-trail in a solid, cumulative roar. Other shots followed, close enough so that Breck could hear the thin witch-wail of bullets and the flat, hard thwack of them against the scarp. Hoofbeats chattered on that stony floor, and he knew that Killene's men had cut into the herd and swept into the Notch.

THERE came to him at that moment a cold and precise plan of action, and he realized all the time that there had been this alternative.

SORONADO DEADLINE

The cattle below him had not yet run wild. They stood in a stark, fuddled panic that was still corked up inside them, their motionless bodies braced against the shock that hammered downtrail from the shift and plunge of the leaders. But the deep-throated bawl that swept along the ledge told him they were ready to bolt.

Breck let a sudden wild shout tear out and go racketing down the Notch. "Fight!" he yelled. "Make noise, you Texas sons! Killene's stampeding your herd!"

He had no way of knowing whether his words had carried to the drag. For hard on the tail of that shout, he was driving lead into the cattle below him.

That touched off a tumult that seemed to pick up the world, and break it, and leave the dust of its collapse in Breck's ears. Cows went down bawling, steers sunfished off the ledge and dropped into the black void beyond, and all the cattle along that ledge stampeded.

Breck was prepared for the thing that happened. Critters were never predictable at a time like this—they were like a thrown pack of cards that might scatter out into any one of the innumerable combinations—but this time he had called the turn.

His shots cut through the herd like a wedge, breaking it up into two distinct parts, flinging one part forward into Killene's men and the other backward against the McFarlane crew.

The upward slam of the herd might be enough to deadlock the stampede beating down from above—might even be enough to turn it back upon Killene's men and catch them in their own grisly trap. But the cattle hurtling downtrail . . .

Well, if there were not too many of them, and if the wild momentum of their drive were not too great, the drag-riders might be able to booger them over the ledge. Or back up the trail into that murderous maul of beef he had aimed at Killene's gunmen.

The outcome hinged entirely on numerical proportions he had not even been able to reckon . . . and the price of failure would be wholesale tragedy.

Breck leaned backward into the slope, bracing himself against the bitter jar of recoil, and went on whipping lead at the shanks of the up-driven herd. And now,

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

throughout that winding passage, he could hear the run of chaos—the herd's insane voice and the beat of its cloven hoofs tearing sound out of the cliffside as if it were a gigantic keyboard. And he could hear the plunge of bodies off-trail and the meaty *slap-slap* of them against the cutbanks below. He heard a horse's thin, high scream, but in the confusion of the moment he did not even know from which part of the Notch it came.

The .44 clicked on an empty, and he clipped fresh caps into its chambers. That was when the roar of gunfire, rocking up to him from the west, told him that the trail hands had not yet been dusted off the ledge. They were fighting; and he knew by the closer roar on his left that Killene's men were still fighting, too.

The break came within the next seconds.

These were the critters—or what was left of them—that he had sent downtrail! These were the critters that might have swept Medley McFarlane and her crew into the Gorge. But the crew had turned them in time.

The crew had thrown them pitching and failing and twisting into the rumps of the cattle Breck had sent uptrail, and now he heard the huge concussion of that impact, solid and sledgelike. It was the sound for which he had prayed to hear, but for which he had not dared to hope.

And on the heel of it, a man up there was screaming an oath.

GUNS continued their vicious clacketing, and they were fighting now for the lives of the men who owned them. But the trail hands below were shooting, too, throwing terror into the stragglers and adding their weight to the odds against Killene's men.

Oversure of themselves, Killene's bunch had ventured too far into the Notch. They had not foreseen the unforeseeable thing: that Breck would be there to break the stampede into two unequal parts. And now that those parts had come together in a battering ram aimed at themselves, they could not retreat. There was no time to retreat. They could only fight.

And, as it turned out, they could not even do that very long.

Breck heard the end of it. He heard beef

SORONADO DEADLINE

thwacking like hail on the cutbanks, and he knew by the screams of men and horses that there were other bodies going down as well. He heard those sounds rising to their shrieking crest and then dwindling away into silence so deep that the plaint of one lost calf was loud against it. No more shots came from above. There was silence.

Breck got down from the shelf and went uptrail, his .44 still in his hand. The carcasses of shot and trampled critters were scattered along the ledge, and someone who might once have been named Creel lay slack and motionless across the body of a fallen horse.

He went on.

Jap Killene saw him coming. A thin, huddled figure perched on the rocky stairway by which Breck had entered the Notch, Killene laughed his deprecating little laugh and said: "Howdy, banker." And raised his gun.

Breck said, "I reckon it's a joke on me. I might have known you'd be sitting in the grandstand while your men did the work."

Killene's teeth shone in the gloom. He said, "I've always liked that way of handling things, but I'll enjoy takin' care of this particular chore by myself."

The flare of his gun-fire yellowed his gaunt face, and Breck felt the heat of a passing bullet on his cheek. He steadied the .44 and squeezed, aiming carefully rather than fast. Killene stood up and straightened to an incredible height, his arms lifted like a diver's, and then he pitched forward into the Notch and lay there on his face, very quietly.

"That," said Breck, "was for the bank, Jap. And for the thing you were aiming to do here. And for . . ."

He said no more. Down-trail he heard the creak of the McFarlane chuckwagon and the strike of hoofs on stone. Then from up there above the Notch trail there came to him suddenly another sound. Rain.

Rain was sluicing down onto the cattle that Killene had stampeded over the Pine Tree range. Those fat black clouds had broken now, and there would be no need of grassfires to lay the threat of Texas fever. It was as much, thought Breck, as any man could ask.

And there being nothing more to ask for, he dropped his gun and let a deep, luxuri-

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ous weariness tuck itself around him; and
toppled face down to the floor of the Notch.

MEDLEY McFARLANE told him,
"You practically had concussion from
that head wound, Doc Tellifer says. So you
don't have to be ashamed of yourself for
fainting. Or for anything else. I—I reck-
on I don't need to tell you how grateful
dad and I are. And the whole range, too,
Breck . . ."

Breck grinned palely at her from his big
four-poster bed in the Doubletree ranch-
house. "No," he said, "you don't have to
tell me. Your dad . . .?"

"He's doing all right. And we only lost
about two hundred and fifty cattle, which
isn't so bad when you stop to think how
much we *could* have lost.

"Sheriff Mehan is going around trying
to explain just why he deputized a bunch of
cattle thieves, and other people are going
around saying that they never did quite
trust Jap Killene. . . . There'll be a crowd
of depositors waiting in line to put their
money back in your bank by the time you're
out of bed, Breck."

Breck propped his chin on one palm and
looked up at her. "I'm practically out this
minute. This country needs a bank, but—
well, I reckon I'll never make much of a
swivel-chair cowboy, Medley. I'm going
to let old Amby run the bank, and—" he
grinned again—"I guess maybe it might be
a good idea to have Chet Laybaugh posted
near the vault with his sixgun after this.
Me, I expect to have other fish to fry."

"What . . . sort of fish?"

"Well," said Breck, "I'm going to fatten
me up some cattle for the fall market. *Lots*
of cattle. And that reminds me of another
thing: One of the reasons I couldn't finance
you and your dad was that I figured that
range of yours was overgrazed. What I've
been thinking, though, by knocking out a
few fences here and there I could make
elbow room on my Pine Tree spread for the
whole new herd."

Medley's cheeks reddened. She said,
"That—that's sweet of you, Breck . . . but
wouldn't we have to have a—a kind of
family bookkeeping system?"

"That's just what I mean," Breck said
quite close to her lips. "And I hope we can
keep adding—to the family." ● ● ●

GUNSMOKE INTERLUDE

(Continued from page 75)

for at a post office up in Montana a year or two ago.

Gordon is going out west. There's nothing I can do to stop him since you have done so well. He says there's no use of anyone staying here and slaving for a living when one can make a fortune like you have in the West. Maybe you will see him out there sometime. . . .

The street was hushed and deserted but there were, Clay knew, faces at every window, faces waiting to watch the two men who would walk along the street.

The mail carrier's buckboard was a dwindling dot on the prairie that stretched eastward from the town.

H HE SAW the kid come down the steps from the marshal's office and walk out to the center of the dusty street. There he stood and waited, guns on his hips, hands hanging at his side.

I could still unbuckle my guns and walk to meet him with them in my hand, Clay told himself. But even as he thought of it, he knew he couldn't do it. It was an action that was counter to everything he'd ever done, every thing he'd believed in, every code he'd followed.

He paced slowly down the steps and into the center of the street. He turned around and faced the kid and they started walking.

In a little while, Clay thought, John Trent will come riding in and he'll only tell them who I am. Esther will never know, for the letter will be mailed sixty miles from here, although perhaps she'll wonder why I don't write from Mexico.

John Trent will come riding in and he'll only know me by the name of Coleman Clay, with a price upon my head. No one else, absolutely no one, knows my other name. And the kid will never know.

Ten thousand dollars, Clay told himself, should set a young fellow up in fine style and his Ma will be right proud. ● ● ●

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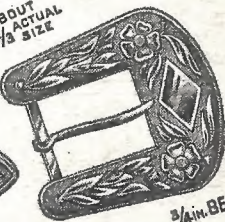




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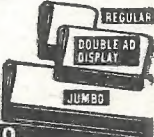
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 57)

to Dayvault, accepting the offer he had made.

... I have had a streak of luck, winning \$1000.00 reward money from Wells Fargo, and it puts me in a position to take advantage of your offer. I will be at the Triangle M in a day or two, ready to start. Very truly, Wyatt Horn.

The next letter was harder to write.

Dear Nora; I am home safe and sound. I suppose you were surprised when I was gone. I will explain it when I see you. Everything is working out fine. I am sure happy. I am sure you will be too when I see you. I ought to be there in a day or two. I hope this letter finds you well. Very truly—

He stopped, struck that out, and tried a few others: Sincerely—out—Your friend—out—Your sincere—out. Then he wrote, For now, I kiss you good-night, fell over on his side and went to sleep. ● ● ●

THE DEADLY DOGIE

(Continued from page 92)

Jed, something very new and very pleasant. But his first words gave no hint of it.

"Aw, quit it!" he burst out awkwardly.

"Don't be sore, Jed," she begged between sobs. "I had to dress like this. The Judge said you wouldn't let me ride with you and the boys if you knew I was a girl."

Afterward, when the Kid had decided she would rather make the "helluva" ride back than to stay in that camp another minute and Jed had said he'd send the boys over in the morning to clean up and get the cattle, he found her horse and led the way back to Rusty.

He was fastening his chaps when he snapped erect like a startled deer.

"What's wrong, Jed?"

But Jed only grinned up at her, his teeth flashing white in the moonlight. He sure hoped the Judge had not found that new foreman! ● ● ●

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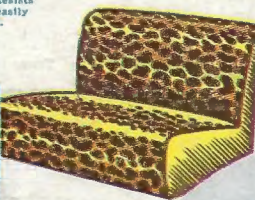
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Like looking through fine sun glasses! Stone glare without reducing vision. No heels, no bolts, no glue! Adheres permanently to the inside of your windshield. You'll wonder how you ever drove without it!

**New Miracle
AUTOMATIC AUTO WASHER**
3 FEET LONG!

**Special \$3.95
Offer**

De Luxe Model, 4 feet long with shut-off valve, 4.95.

R. V. REED, noted Cadillac Sales Manager says: "It's like magic. Cars practically wash themselves."

Attach this miracle washer to your garden hose and watch it blast dirt and grime off your car in less than 10 minutes. A few washings will repay its small cost. New model has features never before incorporated in one washer: rust-proof plastic head denies breakage; rust-proof aluminum handle gives reach without weight; all brass couplings last a lifetime. Extra large brush of soft Morlon bristles will never mat, shed, or tangle. Gently soaks, scrubs, washes and rinses automatically.



**STOP SPENDING
MONEY ON
CAR WASHING**



Luster-tone, plastic head can't break. Soft Morlon Bristles can't mat or tangle. Rust-proof aluminum handle gives reach without weight.

**AMAZING
New WATCH with
MECHANICAL BRAIN**

- It "Remembers"
- It Tells Time
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Measures Speed • Measures Distance • Records Up to 12 Hours • OVER 40 QUALITY FEATURES.

Precision Jeweled. Imported Swiss Movement. Accurate. Dependable. Push-Button Stop and Start. Red Sweep-Second Hand. Unbreakable Crystal. Triple Chrome Plated Case. Shock Resistant. Nite-Vac Radium Glow Dial. Anti-Magnetic. Times Shop work. Times Photography. Times Races. Times Sports. Times Planes. Expansion Band Included.



Compare It at \$50.00

**SPECIAL
OFFER \$8.95**
Plus 90c
Fed. Tax

SEND NO MONEY—MAIL THIS COUPON

**YOUNG PRODUCTS, DEPT. 468
2605 ELMHURST AVENUE
DETROIT 6, MICHIGAN**

Please Send The Following Items:

AUTO SEAT COVERS

- Make of Car: ☐ 2-Door ☐ 4-Door ☐ Coupe
Other: _____
Circle Color: RED BLUE GREEN
☐ SOLID TONE ☐ PLAID
☐ LEOPARD ☐ ZEBRA
☐ Front Only ☐ Front & Rear

- ☐ WALKIE-TALKIE
☐ AUTO SUN VISOR
☐ AUTO WASHER
☐ DELUXE AUTO WASHER
☐ CALENDAR WATCH
☐ COMPASS WATCH

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

☐ Send items checked. I will pay Postman Plus Postage.

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GUARANTEE**
Your Money Promptly
Refunded If You Are
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